



Spinoza's "Ontological" Argument

Don Garrett

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 88, No. 2. (Apr., 1979), pp. 198-223.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28197904%2988%3A2%3C198%3AS%22A%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>

The Philosophical Review is currently published by Cornell University.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/sageschool.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

SPINOZA'S "ONTOLOGICAL" ARGUMENT

Don Garrett

Proposition XI of Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics* is the claim that "God or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists." Spinoza employs four proofs to establish this important proposition, but it is far from obvious how they are to be construed. Almost the only point on which commentators agree is that the proofs include an ontological argument—and even in this, I believe, they are somewhat mistaken. I hope to show that Spinoza is best understood as offering four interrelated arguments which resemble ontological arguments in being essentially a priori and relying on a definition of "God," but which resemble cosmological arguments in depending on a version of the principle of sufficient reason. After some preliminaries, I will discuss the four proofs in order, showing how they rely on the principle of sufficient reason and how they relate to each other. The last two proofs, it will be seen, serve partly to forestall an objection which can be raised about the generalizability of the first two. Finally, I will discuss the implications of Spinoza's proofs and their relation to traditional ontological and cosmological arguments.

I

Standard interpretations. First, let us briefly consider two prominent interpretations of the proofs of Proposition XI. Harry Wolfson proposes that the proofs should be reduced to trivial "analytical syllogisms." He reconstructs the first proof, for example, as follows:

If we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence, then God is immediately perceived by us to exist.

But we have a clear and distinct idea of God as a being whose essence involves existence.

Therefore, God is immediately perceived by us to exist.¹

¹ Wolfson, Harry. *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1934), pp. 174-213.

The second and fourth proofs are rendered similarly with "God as a being whose essence involves existence" being replaced by "God as a being whose existence is necessary by His own nature" and "God as a being of the highest power," respectively; the third proof Wolfson regards as straightforwardly cosmological. According to Wolfson, the first, second, and fourth proofs simply report that we have an immediate rational perception or intuition of God's existence, and then claim that such an intuition is veridical. A variant of Wolfson's view is developed by William Earle, who maintains that Spinoza's entire discussion of Proposition XI "may not be an argument at all," but that it does express an "intellectual intuition" (in the Kantian sense) of God's essence and necessary existence.² On the Wolfson-Earle view, Spinoza is essentially reporting, rather than arguing, that we have or can have an experience of God's nature in which we rationally perceive His existence as necessitated by His essence. Nevertheless, both Wolfson and Earle claim that we should regard Spinoza as giving an "ontological argument," and both are willing to make this claim for the same reason. Wolfson argues, and Earle implies, that ontological arguments, properly understood, *never* do more than report, analyze, and elucidate such a rational perception.

This interpretation has something to recommend it. There is good evidence in Spinoza's writings that he regards such an experience as the best way to come to know of God's existence. In the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, for example, he maintains that the best method of epistemology would be to begin, before all else, with the clear and distinct idea of God, an idea which makes it clear that God exists. Yet in the *Ethics*, Spinoza does not simply invite us to reflect upon this idea until God's existence becomes certain. As Earle admits, Spinoza certainly *seems* to provide arguments for Proposition XI. And these apparent arguments have the following property: not a single premise or conclusion of Wolfson's "analytical syllogisms" about our experience occurs anywhere among them. An in-

² Earle, William A. "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza" and "The Ontological Argument in Spinoza: Twenty Years Later," both in *Spinoza: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Marjorie Greene, ed. (Garden City, New York: 1973).

terpretation which could account more plausibly for Spinoza's argumentation is therefore to be preferred.

H. H. Joachim does claim to find a full-blooded argument in Proposition XI, and seeks to explain the difficulty philosophers have had in agreeing about it as due to the fact that it contains a missing premise. He writes:

Except in the third proof, Spinoza has not expressly supplied the minor premise for this reasoning and hence he has been misunderstood. The cogency of the argument depends upon the unexpressed postulate that 'something—at any rate some contingent modal being, some being which therefore implies self-determined or substantial being—does exist.' But this is a postulate which assuredly does not require explicit statement. For deny that anything in any sense is, and in your denial you assert at least your own existence.³

Joachim claims that all four proofs are variations on a single theme: "once grant that anything is actual and you must admit that God necessarily is actual." He further claims that Spinoza's argument, alone among formulations of the ontological argument, escapes Kant's criticism and is in fact valid.

I agree that, when his tacit premises are included, Spinoza's arguments are valid; but I disagree as to what their premises are. Spinoza does employ a largely unexpressed "postulate." It is easy to see, however, that this postulate cannot be the claim that something or other exists. Spinoza calls the third proof of Proposition XI a *posteriori* because it relies on the proposition that "we ourselves exist." According to Joachim, it is the certainty of this proposition which underlies the certainty of the more general claim that something or other exists: we can know that something or other exists before we know that God exists chiefly because each of us knows himself to exist. But Spinoza clearly regards the other three proofs as *a priori*, as Joachim himself remarks.⁴ If Spinoza had meant them to rely upon a tacit premise that we exist, or upon the more general premise that some contingent being exists, then presumably he would have regarded them as *posteriori* as well. One does not make an *posteriori* argument into an *a priori* one by making all of the

³ Joachim, H. H. *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza* (New York: 1901), pp. 51-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45. Spinoza calls the fourth proof *a priori*, and implies a contrast to the first two proofs when he calls the third proof a *posteriori*.

empirically-supported premises tacit. (As we shall see later, Spinoza is entitled to take the proposition that something or other exists as a priori—but this follows only with the tacit premise which I attribute to him, and does not follow from any claim which Joachim ascribes to him.) It is in fact very odd that Joachim persists in calling the arguments "ontological" while attributing to them a missing premise to the effect that something or other exists—the sort of premise which constitutes the essential feature of cosmological arguments. It is not at all surprising, on the other hand, that an essentially cosmological argument should be found to escape Kant's criticism of ontological arguments.

For the reasons cited, and others as well, neither the Joachim interpretation nor the Wolfson-Earle interpretation is satisfactory as an account of Spinoza's intentions. Nevertheless, each of them is partly right. Although Spinoza's arguments do not employ the premise Joachim proposes, they do rely on a largely tacit premise, and they do bear important resemblances to cosmological arguments. Like many cosmological arguments, they rely on a principle of sufficient reason. And although the arguments for Proposition XI are neither trivial nor based on the report of a personal experience, Wolfson and Earle are clearly correct when they say that Spinoza believes it is possible to know of God's existence by means of a "rational perception" of His essence. As we shall see, however, Spinoza's strategy is to give a set of original—and nonexperiential—arguments to show that such an experience is possible.

II

Definitions. Before turning to the proofs themselves, a few words must be said about the terms "cause," "effect," "cause of itself," and "essence involving existence," as they occur in the Axioms and Definitions. Axiom III of Part I of the *Ethics* reads:

From a given determinate cause an effect necessarily follows; and, on the other hand, if no determinate cause be given, it is impossible that an effect can follow.

"X causes Y," in Spinoza's usage, is best understood as meaning

“X provides (at least part of) the reason for the being or nature of Y.” Spinoza mentions several kinds of causation (immanent, transient, efficient, proximate, and remote), several kinds of things which can be causes (individual things, infinite and eternal modes, and substance itself), and several kinds of things which can be effects (existences, essences, and actions); but this is the central meaning these uses share. If we read Spinoza’s term “effect” liberally, as “state of affairs,” Axiom III then claims that the full reason or explanation of a state of affairs must constitute a sufficient condition for it, and that no state of affairs can lack such a reason; in other words, that a sufficient reason can be given why everything should be as it is. This claim can fairly be called a principle of sufficient reason. On the other hand, if we read “effect” more strictly, as “state of affairs having a cause,” then Axiom III makes a more trivial claim, one which must be supplemented by the claim that every state of affairs is an effect in order to provide us with a principle of sufficient reason.

There are several reasons for adopting the former, more liberal, interpretation of “effect.” Doing so permits us to find a basis in the Axioms for claims that Spinoza makes later; furthermore, adopting the stricter interpretation renders Axiom III analytic in a way that would make it more suited to being a Definition than to being an Axiom. But it is difficult to be certain how Axiom III is intended, since, curiously enough, it is cited by number only once—at Proposition XXVII—and then in a way consistent with either interpretation. I will, nevertheless, refer to the principle that every state of affairs has a sufficient reason or explanation as “Spinoza’s principle of sufficient reason.” For it is clear that Spinoza does *believe* every state of affairs to have a cause, even if he does not intend to make this claim in the Axioms.⁵ It is equally clear that he cites a corollary of this principle—the corollary that there is a sufficient reason or cause for each of those states of affairs which consists of the

⁵ For proof that Spinoza requires a cause for every state of affairs consisting in the existence of a thing, see *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* Section 92, *Ethics* Book I Proposition VIII Note 2, and the second proof of Proposition XI. For proof that he requires a cause for every state of affairs consisting in the nonexistence of a thing, see the second proof of Proposition XI. For proof that he requires causes for other states of affairs, see Propositions XXV and XXVIII.

existence or nonexistence of a particular thing—in Proposition XI, and that he employs the corollary in his effort to prove the existence of God.

According to Definition I of Part I, the expression "cause of itself" is to denote those things whose essences "involve existence" or which "cannot be conceived not to exist." The two parts of this definition provide logical and psychological ways, respectively, of describing logically necessary existence. It is not obvious that having an "essence involving existence" should entail having logically necessary existence, but that is the case for Spinoza. He insists that an adequate definition should capture the essence of the thing defined; it follows that a being whose essence involves existence will be one whose existence follows from its definition. Indeed, Spinoza expressly states, in Section 97 of the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, that the definition of an uncreated (that is, self-caused) being must leave "no room for doubt as to whether the thing exists or not." Any being whose existence follows in such a way from definitions alone may fairly be said to exist as a matter of logical necessity. Axiom VII of Part I later assures us that everything meeting the logical condition—having an essence involving existence—will also meet the psychological condition: its nonexistence will be inconceivable. Thus, self-causation is identified in Definition I with logically necessary existence.⁶ It is also logically necessary existence that Spinoza intends when he speaks simply of "necessary existence"; this is shown by his definitions of "necessary existence" as existence whose denial implies a contradiction, in the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (Section 53) and the *Ethics* (Book I Proposition XXXIII).

The first proof. We can now outline the first proof of Proposition XI. It argues that if God's existence were not necessary, then His nonexistence would be inconceivable, in which case, by Axiom VII, His essence would not involve existence. But,

⁶ I believe this identification is fundamentally correct. Only if the existence of a thing were logically necessary would the understanding of its nature forestall the possibility of questions as to why it should exist rather than something else or nothing at all, and explain that existence without making reference to any other existing things.

Spinoza reminds us, Proposition VII states that the essence of a substance does “involve existence, or, in other words, it pertains to its nature to exist.” And the definition of “God” (given in Definition VI) is the definition of a substance. Hence, God’s nonexistence cannot be conceivable, and His existence must be necessary. We may summarize the argument as follows (note that the first premise does not follow from any of Spinoza’s earlier claims unless, as I argued, he identifies self-causation with necessary existence):

- (1) If a thing does not exist necessarily, then its nonexistence is conceivable.
[From Definition I and the identification of self-causation with necessary existence]
- (2) If the nonexistence of a thing is conceivable, then its essence does not involve existence.
[Axiom VII]
- (3) God is defined as a substance.
[From Definition VI]
- (4) The essence of a substance involves existence.
[Proposition VII]
- (5) ∴ God exists necessarily.

From premises (1)–(4), Spinoza constructs a *reductio ad absurdum* for the conclusion. The form of the argument is dictated by two considerations: Spinoza’s expressed preference for *reductio* arguments, and his desire to utilize both of the alternative definitions of “cause of itself” given in Definition I. If it were not for these considerations, he could just as well infer directly from premises (3) and (4) that God’s essence involves existence; and from this, Definition I, and the identification of self-causation with necessary existence, he could infer that God’s existence is necessary. In this way, he could preserve the fundamental nature of the proof without the need to mention inconceivability or Axiom VII.

Proposition VII. Clearly, the heart of the first proof is Proposition VII, the proposition that “it pertains to the nature of substance to exist.” Proposition VII is demonstrated by arguing that since a substance cannot be produced by another thing (by the Corollary of Proposition VI), a substance must be the cause of itself, and so (by Definition I) have an essence involving existence.

To argue in this manner is undeniably to assume that no being exists without a cause, that is, without a reason or explanation. Even if this consequence of Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason is granted, however, it follows only that every actually *existing* substance is self-caused, and so has an essence involving existence. For a possible substance might fail to have some other thing for its cause, and fail to be the cause of itself, and yet not be existing-without-a-cause—by not existing at all. But the conclusion that the essence of every existing substance involves existence would be too weak for Spinoza's purposes; if Proposition VII, and hence premise (4), meant only this, the first proof of Proposition XI could show only that *if* God exists at all, *then* he exists necessarily. If the first proof is to be valid, Proposition VII must mean that all *possible* substances have essences involving existence. Yet that conclusion does not follow from the argument actually given for Proposition VII, even when it is taken together with the additional premise that no being can exist without a reason or cause.

Perhaps it is because he senses this apparent lacuna that Joachim is led to insist that Spinoza relies on an existential premise. But no such premise is needed to supplement Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason, as the second proof of Proposition XI makes clear. As he there reminds us, the nonexistence of a thing, the noninstantiation of an essence, is also an effect for Spinoza, and as such requires a reason or cause. His version of the principle of sufficient reason is strong enough to entail that everything which exists has a cause for its existence and that everything which fails to exist has a cause for its nonexistence. Let us add this corollary of Spinoza's strong principle of sufficient reason to his two explicit premises for Proposition VII:

- (6) Nothing can cause the existence of a substance other than the substance itself.

[Corollary of Proposition VI]

- (7) If a thing is the cause of itself, then its essence involves existence.

[From Definition I]

- (8) For everything (existing or not existing) there must be a cause either of its existence (if it exists) or of its non-

existence (if it does not).

[From Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason; this corollary is stated in Proposition XI, second proof]

Even from these premises it still does not quite follow that every possible substance has an essence involving existence, for it has not been ruled out that something should cause the nonexistence of a possible substance. No doubt Spinoza thinks it obvious that nothing could prevent the existence of a possible substance, and so endeavors only to show that every existing substance must be self-caused. We may take this claim as a second tacit premise:

(9) Nothing can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance.

Let us agree to give Proposition VII, and hence premise (4), the strong reading Spinoza needs to validate his first proof. From premises (6)–(9) this strong reading of Proposition VII follows:

(10) The essence of every possible substance involves existence.

We need not leave (9) unjustified, however. In his second proof of Proposition XI, Spinoza eliminates the alternative that something could cause the nonexistence of God. He does so in the following way. First, he argues that God's nonexistence could not be caused by a substance with the same set of attributes that God has, apparently on the grounds that if two possible substances share the same set of attributes they are indistinguishable, and hence not really distinct. Such grounds would resemble the grounds he gives for Proposition V. Next, he cites Proposition II, the proposition that "two substances having different attributes have nothing in common with one another." As mentioned earlier, he believes that any causal relation is a relation providing a reason or explanation; and he holds (Axiom V) that one thing cannot explain, or allow us to understand, another thing unless the two things have something in common. (We may speculate that this is in order to permit an aspect of one to play some role in the deduction of an aspect of the other.) With these grounds, he explicitly interprets Proposition II as entailing that no substance could either cause or prevent the existence of another possible substance—such as God—which had a different set of attributes. Finally, he maintains (in keeping with

the spirit of Definition I) that God could not cause His own nonexistence because a thing could cause its own nonexistence only by being logically impossible. Thus, if we wish to borrow and generalize this argument from the second proof, we may justify premise (9) as follows:

(9a) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a substance with the same set of attributes.

[Grounds similar to those for Proposition V]

(9b) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a substance with a different set of attributes.

[From Proposition II and Axiom V]

(9c) Only an impossible being can cause its own nonexistence.

[Parallel of Definition I]

Premises (9a)–(9c) do not rule out all of the alternatives, however. We are still left with a need for the tacit premise:

(9d) The nonexistence of a possible substance cannot be caused by a nonsubstance.

It apparently does not even occur to Spinoza that a nonsubstance might prevent the existence of a substance; if pressed, however, he might derive (9d) from Proposition I, the proposition that "substance is by nature prior to its modifications."

And one more difficulty remains. When we combine (9a)–(9d), we become aware of an ambiguity in (9), the premise that nothing can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance. If we interpret "nothing" as meaning "no state of affairs," then (9) is adequate for the proof of Proposition VII but does not follow from (9a)–(9d) alone. If we interpret it as meaning "no actual being," on the other hand, (9) follows from (9a)–(9d) but is not sufficient along with (6)–(8) to obtain (10). That is, it is not sufficient unless we interpret "a cause" in (8) as meaning "an *actual being* which is a cause"; but then (8) will not follow from even a liberal interpretation of Axiom III. Therefore, unless Spinoza simply commits a fallacy in his argument to show that there could be no cause for God's nonexistence, he must hold at least some principle like the following:

(9e) No state of affairs which does not involve an actual being can cause the nonexistence of a possible substance.

The ascription of (9e) to Spinoza is made plausible by his practice of referring only to existing beings as causes of the existence or nonexistence of other things (with the exception of impossible beings, which cause their own nonexistence). The same practice makes plausible the ascription to him of a version of (9e) extending to the nonexistence of all nonexisting possible beings. He clearly accepts the extension of (9e) to the existence of all actual beings (see note 5). Indeed, an extended version of (9e) applying to the existence of all actual beings and to the nonexistence of all nonactual beings would follow from (8) if we were to read (8)'s "a cause" as meaning "an actual being which is a cause." It is quite reasonable to speculate that Spinoza at least half intends this reading of (8); however, I prefer to construe (8) as modestly as possible and to isolate (9e) as a separate premise. This moderate reading of (8) requires a strong reading of (9), a reading which follows from (9a)-(9e).

The second proof. The second proof of Proposition XI, we now see, is simply a more explicit formulation of the argument which is needed to justify Proposition VII, but made for the special case of God rather than the general case of substance(s). It begins with an explicit statement of the principle implicitly involved in the proof of Proposition VII, the principle that there must be a reason or cause for the existence or nonexistence of every possible thing. As noted, if Axiom III is given a liberal interpretation, this principle follows from it; otherwise, the principle does not follow from Spinoza's earlier claims. Spinoza then argues that if there is a cause for God's existence, it is either in Himself, in which case He is self-caused and exists necessarily, or in some other being. But, as in the argument for Proposition VII, this latter alternative is ruled out. (It is done here in a trivially different way. Instead of employing the Corollary of Proposition VI, he observes that God is defined as a substance and cites Proposition VII itself.) It follows that God's existence is logically necessary unless there is *no* reason at all for His existence. But by the principle cited at the beginning of the proof, if there is no reason for His existence, then there must be a reason for His nonexistence. As we have already seen, however, Spinoza argues that such a reason could not be found in another substance, and

he assumes that it could not be found in a nonsubstance or in any state of affairs not involving the existence of some actual being. Such a reason would therefore have to be found in God's own nature; in other words, God's existence would have to be self-contradictory, or logically impossible. This, says Spinoza, would be "absurd." Hence, he concludes, God necessarily exists. We may summarize the second proof:

- (11) For everything (existing or not existing) there must be a cause either of its existence (if it exists) or of its non-existence (if it does not).
[From Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason]
- (12) God is defined as a substance.
[From Definition VI]
- (13) Nothing can cause the existence of a substance other than the substance itself.
[From Proposition VII]
- (14a)-(14e) [Premises (9a)-(9e), with "God" replacing "a possible substance."]
- (15) To be self-caused is to exist necessarily.
[Identification made in Definition I]
- (16) ∴ God necessarily exists.

A difficulty with these proofs. Unfortunately for Spinoza, however, it seems that the form of argument given in the first two proofs is capable of proving too much. He defines "God" as "the substance consisting of infinite [that is, all possible, or unlimited] attributes." But there are other possible definitions of substances which might be constructed in a similar way: for example, "the substance whose only attribute is extension," and "the substance whose only attribute is Thought." And if there are more than these two attributes in the universe, then there will be other such substances-of-one-attribute definable, as well as a number of substances-of-two-attributes. If there are more than three attributes, there will also be a number of substances-of-three-attributes definable, and so on. It should be emphasized that the proof of Proposition VII is a perfectly *general* proof of the necessary existence of substance. The first two proofs of Proposition XI seem on the face of them to serve just as well for any of these possible substances as they do for God. For example, it could be argued that, since the substance whose only attribute

is Thought is by definition a substance, it cannot be conceived as not existing, since by Proposition VII it pertains to the nature of substance to exist.

Spinoza is thus presented with the following problem. There are many possible definitions of substances (exactly how many is a function of the number of attributes there can be, but given that there are at least two attributes, there are at least three such definitions), each of which is apparently consistent. According to Proposition VII, any consistent definition of a substance must be instantiated. But the joint instantiation of all of the apparently consistent definitions would contradict Proposition V, which declares that no two substances can share the same attribute. If, for example, every definition of a substance-of-one-attribute were instantiated, substances of more than one attribute could exist only by sharing attributes with substances-of-one-attribute. The challenge for Spinoza is to show that some of the apparently consistent definitions are really inconsistent, and thus that they do not fall under the scope of Proposition VII.

Wolfson believes that Spinoza has already concluded prior to Proposition VII that there is only one substance, but I can find little support for Wolfson's view. In Proposition VIII Spinoza is still speaking of "every substance," and he begins by mentioning "substance which has only one attribute," arguing hypothetically that—just as I said—any such substance would, by Proposition VII, exist necessarily. The conclusion of his hypothetical argument is only that any substance must be infinite within the realm of its own attributes. The possibility of the existence of more than one substance is not ruled out until Proposition XIV—and then on the grounds that the existence of any other substances would be incompatible (by Proposition V) with the existence of God, whose existence was proven in Proposition XI. But of course this argument for Proposition XIV does not solve Spinoza's problem. Why not instead have given a proof parallel to the first or second proof of Proposition XI—as he tells us we could—to establish the existence of, say, each substance-of-one-attribute? Then at Proposition XIV we could have ruled out the existence of God, the substance of all attributes, by showing that His existence would (by Proposition V) be incompatible with the existence of all the other sub-

stances already "proven" to exist. This difficulty cannot be ignored. For it may be observed that the validity of the first proof and the justification of premises (14a)–(14e) of the second proof depend on Spinoza's assumption that the definition of "God" is consistent, or that God is a possible substance. And the possibility of an a priori proof of God's nonexistence, like the one just outlined, calls that assumption into question.

One way to show that—contrary to first appearances—no substance other than God is even possible, would be to show that the existence of any other substance entails a contradiction. Since Spinoza regards it as a proven necessity that no two substances can share an attribute, he can argue that the existence of any substance other than God entails God's nonexistence. So if he could demonstrate at the same time that the existence of any substance entails the existence of God, he could then credibly claim to have derived a contradiction from the assumption that a substance other than God exists. In effect, the existence of any such substance would entail the existence of another being, God, incompatible with its own existence. Finally, if it could be safely assumed that the existence of God does not entail the existence of any other substance, then it could be argued that the definition of God had been shown to be the only consistent definition of a substance. I believe that Spinoza recognizes the problem I have described, and that the third and fourth proofs embody the strategy I have suggested. Let us now consider those proofs.

III

The third proof. In the third proof of Proposition XI, Spinoza first seeks to establish that if any being exists necessarily, God exists necessarily. It is self-evident, he claims, that ability to exist is power and that inability to exist is a lack of power. This claim does not seem self-evident, but we may regard it as a stipulative definition of "power." From the definition, Spinoza is able to derive the premise:

- (17) If the absolutely infinite being does not exist, but some necessary being does exist, then the existing necessary

being is more powerful than the absolutely infinite being.

[From the stipulative definition of "power"]

According to Spinoza, however, it is also self-evident that the consequent of premise (17) is impossible:

- (18) No being can be more powerful than the absolutely infinite being.

[Self-evident]

He need not rely on a claim of self-evidence; as we shall see in the fourth proof, he does have grounds for premise (18). The absolutely infinite being, of course, is God.

- (19) God is defined as the absolutely infinite substance.

[From Definition VI]

Unfortunately, premises (17)–(19) entail at best that God exists, not that God necessarily exists. Spinoza seems to assume that "power" and "ability to exist" apply only to necessary beings, and we could supplement his argument by adding a premise to that effect. More simply, however, we can appeal to Proposition VII:

- (20) Every possible substance exists necessarily.

[From Proposition VII (construed as (10)) and Definition I]

After showing that the absolutely infinite being, God, exists necessarily if any being exists necessarily, Spinoza rather hastily infers that either God exists necessarily or else nothing exists at all. This conclusion clearly depends on the proposition that if anything at all exists, a necessary being exists. He seems to think this proposition is obvious, but he does provide enough clues in the proof itself to enable us to reconstruct his argument for it:

- (21) There is nothing other than substances and modes.

[From Axiom I and Definitions III and V]

- (22) Any substances there may be are self-caused, i.e., exist necessarily.

[From Proposition VII (construed as (10)) and Definition I]

- (23) Any modes which may exist must be in, or explained by, some substance.

[From Definition V]

It may be observed that premises (21)–(23) also jointly entail a corollary of the principle of sufficient reason—that everything which actually exists has a cause of its existence. They do not, however, entail the stronger claim made in the second proof that, in addition, everything which fails to exist has a cause of its existence. Later I will maintain that Spinoza could use the stronger claim of the second proof as part of an a priori argument for the conclusion that something or other does exist. For the sake of “ease,” however, he rules out the alternative that nothing exists at all with a contingent premise:

(24) We ourselves exist.

He infers from premises (17)–(20) that God exists necessarily if any being exists necessarily, and from premises (21)–(23) that some being exists necessarily if anything exists at all. Hence from these premises plus premise (24), he may conclude:

(25) God exists necessarily.

The fourth proof. In the fourth proof, Spinoza begins by taking it for granted that some being can “derive its existence from itself” (that is, be self-caused and exist necessarily, as he makes clear in the discussion of the proof, where he stipulates that only substances derive their existence from themselves). He then tells us that he equates greater reality with greater power to exist, and he characterizes God as the most real being. Although it is not explicitly cited, it is Proposition IX which licenses this characterization of God as the most real being. Proposition IX identifies greater reality with having a greater number of attributes; it follows that God is most real because He has all possible attributes. Thus when reality is equated with power, Proposition IX supports the claim that God has the greatest power to exist—a claim which is also the basis for premise (18) of the third proof.

Since God has the greatest power to exist, Spinoza implies, He would overrule any conflicting substances, which, having fewer attributes, could only have less power to exist. Thus, if any being can derive its existence from itself, God does so; and it has been assumed that some being can; hence God is self-caused and exists necessarily. We may summarize the final proof:

- (26) At least one being exists necessarily (derives its existence from itself).
 [Assumption]
- (27) Greater power to exist is greater reality.
 [Stipulation]
- (28) To have greater reality is to have a greater number of attributes.
 [Proposition IX]
- (29) If any being exists necessarily, the being with the greatest power to exist exists necessarily.
 [Self-evident]
- (30) God is the substance of all possible attributes.
 [Definition VI]
- (31) ∴ God necessarily exists.

Some puzzles solved. It is difficult for the standard interpretations to account for the nature of the last two proofs. Joachim, for example, expresses understandable puzzlement that these two proofs should “rest upon the non-Spinozistic assumption that there are or may be more substances than one,” a supposition which “if maintained, would destroy the validity of the arguments.”⁷ Wolfson, for his part, finds it possible to construe the third argument as ontological, and thus is led to claim that the two proofs are of radically different kinds, even though Spinoza describes them as based on “the same grounds.”⁸ The fourth proof is especially troublesome for Joachim. He promises, in his discussion of Proposition XI, to show that each of the four proofs is of the form, “if anything exists, then God necessarily exists.” He is immediately forced to go back on this promise in summarizing the fourth proof (which he considers first). He correctly sums up that proof as asserting: “admit that anything exists necessarily and you admit that God necessarily exists.”⁹ Yet

⁷ Joachim, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁸ Wolfson, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201. According to Wolfson, one argument is ontological while the other is cosmological, one argument provides “direct knowledge” while the other provides “indirect knowledge,” and they have none of their premises in common. He explains Spinoza’s remark as due to the fact that both proofs mention the concept of power and, Wolfson believes, are both therefore derived from the same argument in Descartes.

⁹ Joachim, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

if Spinoza is indeed offering an ontological argument' in the fourth proof, as Joachim claims, it is very puzzling that Spinoza should assume that some beings can exist necessarily in order to prove that God does so. For it is the claim that some beings can exist necessarily which is likely to be the point of contention for anyone who doubts the ontological argument.

But we are now in a position to solve these puzzles. First, we can see why Spinoza employs the "non-Spinozistic assumption" that there is or may be more than one substance. He does so in order to justify the first two proofs, by showing that the existence of any substance entails the existence of God. The first two proofs have the advantage of being direct and to the point, but they have the disadvantage of failing to make clear why similar proofs could not be offered for other substances as well. The third and fourth proofs are intended as proofs in their own right, even though they are more roundabout. But they also serve another purpose. Because they begin by establishing or assuming that some necessary being or other exists, their line of argument—if correct—illustrates that the existence of any lesser substance entails the existence of a substance, God, which is incompatible with the existence of the lesser substance. They thus presumably show the definitions of lesser substances to be defective. It is partly their similarity in this respect which allows Spinoza to regard the two proofs as versions of the same argument.

Secondly, we can see that Spinoza is *not* offering ordinary ontological arguments for Proposition XI, but rather arguments based on the principle of sufficient reason; and we can see that his main interest in the fourth proof is to defend his first two proofs. So he simply assumes that at least one being can be self-caused, since he concludes in Proposition VII that *any* substance is self-caused. Still, he does not argue in the fourth proof that there *is* at least one substance, and it might be supposed that this assumption would render the fourth proof as a posteriori as the third. Such is not the case for Spinoza. Proposition VII, which is intended to be a priori, entails that any consistent definition of a substance is instantiated; and of course any instantiated definition of a substance will be consistent. Hence, a priori, some substance or other exists if and only if some definition of a substance is consistent. But the proposition that

some definition of a substance is consistent is itself presumably a priori if it is true at all. Thus the fourth proof is, from Spinoza's point of view, a priori if sound.

This result clears the fourth proof of the charge of being unavoidably a posteriori. However, it ensures the truth of the assumption that some substance exists only if it can be shown that some definition of a substance is consistent, and Spinoza never makes a direct effort to show this. Of course, one method of learning the truth of the claim that a substance exists would be to have the "rational perception" which he believes we can have of God's existence as necessitated by His essence. Perhaps he has this method in mind when he describes the fourth proof as the most difficult one. The third proof contains an argument to show that some substance or other exists, but the argument is a posteriori. However, the claim that there is at least one necessary being or substance might also be defended by argument in a way consistent with the a priori nature of the fourth proof. In the third proof, Spinoza argues a priori from premises (21)–(23) that if anything exists at all, then there must be at least one necessary being. And he could also argue a priori that something or other does exist. In discussing premise (9e), we saw fairly good grounds for ascribing to Spinoza the view that only a state of affairs which involves an actual being can cause the existence of a possible being or cause the nonexistence of a possible being.¹⁰

¹⁰ It might be thought that the nonexistence of substance would very easily cause the nonexistence of modes. For Spinoza holds that every actual contingent being (every actual being whose essence is consistent but does not necessarily involve existence) requires some necessary being to cause its existence. Let us call this claim of Spinoza's "Principle A." If nothing existed, there would be no necessary being to cause the existence of the contingent beings; and the lack of such a necessary being would itself be a sufficient reason for the nonexistence of the contingent beings. Thus the absence of substances would cause the noninstantiation of consistent essences.

The answer is that Principle A itself is derived from the principle of sufficient reason, and the mere fact that some state of affairs *S* would violate the principle of sufficient reason is not itself a sufficient reason for the occurrence of the state of affairs not-*S*. For imagine that it *were* a sufficient reason. And suppose that in some circumstances it is entirely undetermined whether state of affairs *S* should occur or not—suppose that it is entirely a matter of chance. Then, of course, the occurrence of *S* would violate the principle of sufficient reason, as would the occurrence of not-*S*. But then by the principle that a state of affairs' violation of the principle of sufficient reason is itself a sufficient reason for the

Let us call this view the "principle of actual causes." Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason, or its corollary (8), when taken together with the principle of actual causes, entails that if any beings are possible, then some being is actual. Some essences, according to Spinoza, are not in themselves contradictory; so it would follow that if none of them were instantiated, there would have to be at least one being whose existence caused their non-instantiation. If, as it is reasonable to assume, Spinoza regards the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of actual causes, and the consistency of some essences as a priori truths, then he can take the existence of something or other as a priori as well.

In presenting the fourth proof Spinoza does not try to justify premise (26), the assumption that some necessary being exists, because his main interest is elsewhere. But we have seen that he could have employed two separate lines of argument to justify premise (26) in an a priori way. One line of argument employs Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason, or its corollary (8); the principle of actual causes; and premises (21)–(23). The other employs Proposition VII and the undefended claim that some definition of a substance is consistent. Since the proof of Proposition VII relies on (8), however, the two lines of argument resemble each other in their dependence on the same corollary of the principle of sufficient reason.

An old difficulty again. Nevertheless, someone might raise the following objection: "Like his first two proofs, Spinoza's third and fourth proofs succeed in establishing *God's* existence only on the assumption that *God's* existence is at least possible, or

nonoccurrence of that state of affairs, it would follow that there *was* after all a sufficient reason for both *S* and not-*S*, since the occurrence of not-*S* and of *S*, respectively, would each violate the principle of sufficient reason. Hence, each of *S* and not-*S* both would and would not violate the principle of sufficient reason. This, of course, is a flat contradiction.

The moral is that the principle of sufficient reason, if it is to be consistent, must be understood as demanding that every state of affairs have a sufficient reason—and that this reason be something other than the principle of sufficient reason itself. It cannot be denied that the *existence* of contingent beings in the absence of a necessary being violates Spinoza's principles. But this in no way alters the fact that the *nonexistence* of contingent beings (all of whose essences are consistent) in the absence of a necessary being may constitute, for him, an *equal* violation of them.

that His definition is consistent. If God's existence is not possible, then there is no 'absurdity' in supposing that other beings exist necessarily while He does not, as the third and fourth proofs claim there would be; for the other substances themselves would then be the 'most powerful' beings, since the notion of a greater one, God, would be self-contradictory. But there is no reason why one should be entitled to the assumption that God's existence is possible. Indeed, we have already seen how one might argue within Spinoza's system for the claim that it is *not* possible. The definition of 'God' may not appear inconsistent. But that proves nothing, for the definitions of other substances do not appear to be inconsistent either; yet if Spinoza is correct, at least some definitions of substances must be. From the assumption that some one of the definitions is consistent, Propositions V [that substances cannot share attributes] and VII [that every possible substance has an essence involving existence] can always be used to rule out some others as inconsistent. Thus to assume that the definition of 'God' is consistent, rather than the definitions of other substances, is simply to beg the question."

This objection, however, misses the full force of Proposition IX, the proposition that a greater number of attributes can be identified with greater reality in a thing's essence (and hence greater power to exist). This principle is not at all obvious, although it is treated as if it were; it is claimed to follow simply from the definition of "attribute." When it is added to his other principles, however, Spinoza gains a means of arbitrating among the competing definitions of substances and so of ruling out the existence of substances other than God.

Without Proposition IX, he can say that some definitions of substances are inconsistent, but he cannot provide a method for determining which are the inconsistent ones. But once granted Proposition IX, he can also make a plausible claim to locate squarely the source of the inconsistencies. For he can argue thus: "It is clear that definitions of substances other than God are defective. For it belongs to the nature of substances that nothing can prevent them from existing (by Proposition VII); but the existence of any substance other than God would conflict with God's existence (by Proposition V), and since God has the greater power of existence (by Proposition IX), God would

prevent that substance from existing after all, contrary to the nature of substances. Thus we see that only a being with the greatest power of existence could fulfill all the conditions for being a substance. To speak of a substance which does *not* have the very greatest power of existence (that is, greatest number of attributes) is a contradiction, and any attempt to define such a substance will be inconsistent."

Of course, this argument relies on the claim that God really does have the greatest power to exist, and so it may be accused of assuming that God's existence is possible, and that His definition is consistent. To this accusation Spinoza might reply by interpreting Proposition IX in such a way as to make it *entail* that God's existence is possible if any substance's is. He could do so by taking the scope of Proposition IX to be *all* definitions of beings, so that Proposition IX would grant greater reality and power to the object of whatever definition ascribed the greater number of attributes. Unfortunately for this construal of the proposition, however, it seems possible to construct patently inconsistent definitions of substances which ascribe just as many attributes to their objects as the definition of God ascribes to God. It is better, therefore, to regard the scope of Proposition IX as restricted to *possible* beings. If this is done, the argument just outlined for God's priority over other substances does assume that God's existence is possible. But with this assumption, Spinoza can locate and explain the exact source of the inconsistency in the definitions of other substances; whereas on the assumption that some other definitions of substances are consistent, he is without similar resources to explain precisely *why* the definition of God should be inconsistent (although of course Propositions V and VII will then entail *that* it is). The inconsistency of a definition must have some source within the definition itself; and it is *prima facie* very puzzling that two otherwise identical definitions should differ in their consistency solely on the basis of the number of attributes they ascribe. As we have seen, Proposition IX makes it easy to explain why ascribing only some attributes to a substance should lead to inconsistency even though ascribing all attributes to a substance would not. But if ascribing all attributes to a substance were to generate an inconsistency, there would be no comparably easy explanation of why the same defect should not also infect the

definitions of other substances. While by no means conclusive, these are good grounds for Spinoza to think that God's definition is consistent if any definition of a substance is consistent. Thus, Proposition IX creates at least a presumption in favor of God over other substances.

IV

Summary. We can now summarize and evaluate our results. We have seen that Spinoza does provide four nontrivial, interrelated arguments for the necessary existence of God, and that each of them relies—implicitly or explicitly—on the principle of sufficient reason. In Proposition VII, Spinoza argues that since a substance cannot be caused to exist by anything else, it must be the cause of its own existence (or nonexistence), obviously by the principle of sufficient reason. The first proof of Proposition XI in effect points out that God is defined as a substance, and thus is an instance of Proposition VII. The second proof puts the argument for Proposition VII into a more explicit form and applies it to the specific substance God, arguing by the principle of sufficient reason that God's existence must either be logically necessary or logically impossible. Spinoza declares the latter alternative "absurd."

In the third and fourth proofs, Spinoza is concerned to show why similar proofs are not available for substances other than God. In the third proof, using premises which together amount to a corollary of the principle of sufficient reason, he concludes that if anything exists, some necessary being exists. He also argues that if any necessary being exists, God exists necessarily, and he then points to our own existence to prove that something does exist. In the fourth proof, he makes an assumption—that beings can be self-caused and exist necessarily—the justification of which depends on the principle of sufficient reason. Then he argues, by a tacit application of Proposition IX, that one of these self-caused beings must be God.

Ontological and cosmological arguments. We may define an "ontological argument" as one which seeks to infer God's existence *solely* from the nature of the concept of "God" and the concepts

which make it up. Spinoza's four proofs all rely on a definition of "God," and three of them are a priori. But, unless the principle of sufficient reason or its corollary (8) can somehow be derived from the concept of God, only the fourth proof is arguably "ontological" in this sense; and even the fourth proof will not be ontological if the principle of sufficient reason or its corollary is employed to justify its primary assumption. That the proofs are not ontological should not be surprising. I think Earle is right to say that for Spinoza there is relatively little point in trying to explain the experience of seeing directly how God's existence follows solely from the concept of a substance of all attributes; one is simply supposed to have a clear and distinct idea of God and see that in His essence His existence is necessarily involved, in much the same way that one sees immediately what is involved in the essence of a triangle. Instead, Spinoza argues that the truth of the principle of sufficient reason, in conjunction with his other principles, requires that there be at least one being whose existence is necessary. He then argues that God must be the only such being.

Joachim claims that Spinoza's argument avoids Kant's criticism of ontological arguments; and I indicated that this is to be expected, since as Joachim presents it, Spinoza's argument seems to be cosmological. And the argument as Joachim presents it, with an ineliminable a posteriori premise, is vulnerable to Kant's criticism of cosmological arguments. I take Kant's criticism of cosmological arguments to be that they are just a front for ontological arguments. They are a front for the following reason: Cosmological arguments proceed from their empirical premise by demanding that everything have a sufficient explanation. The God whose existence they attempt to prove, therefore, cannot be a being who is Himself uncaused or unexplained. Rather, He must be self-caused and self-explaining—that is, a necessary being. Logical necessity is the only kind of necessity that will truly suit the purpose, Kant argues; but *logical* necessity must have a logical or conceptual origin; hence, if the existence of God is logically necessary, some form of ontological argument (that is, argument which seeks to infer God's existence solely from the nature of concepts) must be correct. Thus the premise that something or other exists is superfluous, inasmuch as an adequate

cosmological argument can be sound only if some version of the ontological argument is sound as well.¹¹

Of course, the argument Joachim presents is not Spinoza's. Except in the third proof, for the sake of being "more easily understood," Spinoza does not take as a premise either the proposition that we or that something else exists. But his proofs do resemble cosmological arguments in employing a version of the principle of sufficient reason to deduce the existence of a God whose existence is necessary. His virtue is to dispense with the empirical premise and argue almost entirely from the principle of sufficient reason. He is entitled to dispense with the empirical premise, we have seen, because his principle of sufficient reason and his other principles are strong enough to entail that if any definition of a substance is consistent, then something (namely, that substance) exists; and the consistency of definitions is presumably a priori. Spinoza assumes and does not argue that some definition of a substance is consistent. However, his principle of sufficient reason is also strong enough to entail, when taken together with the principle of actual causes and the consistency of some essences, that something or other does exist; and he argues in the third proof that some substance must exist if anything exists. Spinoza's belief that some definition of a substance must be consistent is, I think, chiefly based on his belief that nothing could ultimately explain the existence *or the nonexistence* of particular modes unless at least one substance which is a logically necessary being exists.

Conclusion. We may characterize Spinoza's main line of argument for the existence of God as a cosmological argument which

¹¹ It is consistent to maintain both that God's existence is necessary and that no ontological argument is correct, if the necessity ascribed to God is not logical necessity but some other, perhaps metaphysical, kind. Indeed, this is the option Kant himself holds open for faith. It is also consistent to maintain that there is a logically necessary being but that we are not sufficiently rational to see fully the soundness of the ontological argument for ourselves. This seems to be Saint Thomas' position. It is fully consistent to maintain that it is futile to try to make someone directly grasp the correctness of the ontological argument by rhetorical means if he does not already grasp it. I believe this is roughly Spinoza's position. But if one maintains that God's existence does not follow at *all* from His and other concepts, then it is inconsistent to maintain that He nevertheless exists as a matter of *logical* necessity.

dispenses with the empirical premise; or, if we modify our definition, we can characterize it as an ontological argument which relies on the principle of sufficient reason. In either case, the argument exploits the relationship, described by Kant, between ordinary ontological and cosmological arguments. If we accept Spinoza's principle of sufficient reason and the principle of actual causes, we must accept the existence of a logically necessary being and the soundness of an ontological argument in some form. The same conclusion follows if we accept his principle of sufficient reason, the requirement that actual beings have actual causes, and the empirical existence of something or other. Spinoza and Kant would agree on these points, and so would I. I do not, however, believe in nearly such strong versions of Spinoza's principles, partly because of these consequences. Thus, I think Spinoza's main line of argument is valid but not sound. Kant concludes that since there is no logically necessary existence, we cannot know the principle of sufficient reason to be true. From Spinoza's point of view, however, our knowledge of the principle is not to be challenged, and so he believes he has succeeded in showing that the essence of God *must* involve His existence—a truth which could be *directly* discovered only by those who have the private experience of a clear and distinct idea of God. This is how Spinoza is able to give a nontrivial and non-“analytical” proof of the content of a “rational perception.”¹²

Yale University

¹² I wish particularly to thank Harry Frankfurt, the editors of *The Philosophical Review*, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.