Spinoza's Necessitarianism: Strong or Moderate?

Edwin Curley and Gregory Walski in their paper ‘Spinoza’s Necessitarianism Reconsidered’ argue that Spinoza did not hold the view that they term 'strong necessitarianism', but rather he supported ‘moderate necessitarianism’. Michael V. Griffin in his essay “Necessitarianism in Spinoza and Leibniz” argues against Curley and Walski and maintains that Spinoza supported 'strong necessitarianism'. In this paper I will defend Curley and Walski against Griffin’s objections, though I will suggest an improvement to Griffin's argument that might allow the 'strong necessitarian' view to be successful.

Before getting to the arguments, I must define some terms I will be using in describing both moderate and strong necessitarianism. In this paper, I will use the term ‘configuration’ as meaning the position of all things existing in the universe at any one time. A 'possible world' is a sequence of configurations. The 'actual world' is the possible world that obtains.

Curley and Walski argue that Spinoza held a view that they call ‘moderate necessitarianism’. ‘Moderate necessitarianism’ is basically determinism – the view that there are a set of laws that inexorably determine what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. In the view of determinism if the position of everything existing in the universe and the laws governing the universe are known, then all future events can be predicted perfectly. Determinism does not, however, dictate a particular configuration of the universe at any point in time except insofar as the laws determine all succeeding configurations after a possible initial configuration. The initial configuration of the universe could have been different, so there are other ways the universe could possibly have been.
This view contrasts with what Curley and Walski refer to as ‘strong necessitarianism’, which is held by Don Garrett. This is the view that the actual configuration of the universe at any one time is the only possible one at that time. There are no possible worlds because the actual world is the only way that the universe can be – the actual world is the way the universe necessarily is. There is no room in this view for the universe to be any different – if there is an initial configuration, then the initial configuration is necessarily set up a certain way and the laws of the universe then inexorably dictate the way the universe unfolds, as in determinism.

Curley and Walski begin their argument by objecting to Garrett’s interpretation of Proposition 16 in Book One of Ethics (IP16) in which he argues that Spinoza is committed to these claims:

1. Everything which falls under an infinite intellect follows from the necessity of the divine nature.
2. “The necessity of the divine nature” is something necessary.
3. Whatever follows from something which is necessary is itself necessary.
4. Everything which is actual falls under an infinite intellect.
5. Everything which is actual is necessary.¹

Curley and Walski argue that 3 should be modified to reflect what Spinoza actually claims (by their interpretation) and thus 5 will be modified as well, since it is entailed by 1 through 4. They suggest that 3 and 5 should read this way:

3’. Whatever follows unconditionally from something which is absolutely necessary (i.e., necessary by reason of its essence) is itself absolutely necessary; but if something follows only conditionally from something which is absolutely necessary, then it is not itself absolutely necessary but only conditionally necessary (i.e., necessary by reason of its cause).

5’. Everything which is actual is either absolutely necessary or conditionally necessary.²

This reading, Curley and Walski maintain, better reflects Spinoza’s notion of necessity. They argue that Spinoza allows for two types of necessity: absolute necessity and conditional necessity. Absolute necessity is necessity based on the intrinsic character of the thing, while conditional necessity is based on the cause of the thing. 5’, they note, is no threat to moderate necessitarianism, for conditional necessity allows that the sequence of finite modes in the universe may have been different than it actually has been and is. This allows for possible worlds beyond the actual world because the sequence of causes could have been different – the initial configuration, if there was one, could have been different and thus the causal chain could have been different, producing a world different from the actual world.

Griffin opposes the view of moderate necessitarianism, arguing that Curley and Walski are mistaken in their interpretation and that Garrett is correct. He analyzes what he considers a problem with Curley and Walski’s revised closure principle. It focuses on the second part of the revised closure principle, which reads “but if something follows only conditionally from something which is absolutely necessary, then it is not itself absolutely necessary but only conditionally necessary (i.e., necessary by reason of its cause).”3 Absolute necessity can be introduced if there is an initial configuration of the universe that God necessarily wills. However, since Spinoza says that the sequence of things in the universe is infinite, it therefore has no beginning and no initial configuration and thus no way to introduce any sense of absolute necessity into the equation. Therefore, it appears that the universe is deterministic but not necessitarian, as Curley and Walski argue.

Griffin, however, does not accept this conclusion. He calls attention to Letter 83 of Spinoza’s correspondence, in which he gives ‘motion and rest’ as an example of an infinite immediate mode and ‘the face of the whole universe’ as an example of an infinite mediate mode. He goes on to say

“The scholium to Lemma 7 tells us that there is an individual composed of all finite bodies…so long as the bodies that compose it communicate their motion to each other in a certain fixed manner, the individual exists ‘without any change in its form.’…Spinoza says that the infinite mediate mode he identifies as the face of the whole universe ‘varies in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same.’ If we take his reference to the scholium to Lemma 7 in that letter to mean that he identifies the infinite individual with the face of the whole universe, then the infinite individual exists at every moment of time…then the existence of the infinite individual is absolutely necessary. So no other sequence of finite modes is possible. The actual world is the only possible world.”

Griffin argues that Spinoza identifies the ‘face of the universe’ as an example of an infinite mediate mode and links this implicitly, by reference to the scholium to Lemma 7, to the individual composed of all finite bodies in the universe that exists without a change in form. This individual exists eternally and remains basically the same though the finite bodies move in a fixed manner relative to each other. Griffin interprets this as meaning that the individual, the face of the universe, both necessarily exists and necessarily exists in a certain configuration. The key for Griffin appears to be the phrase ‘varies in infinite ways, nevertheless always remains the same’ when applied to the face of the universe. For Griffin this means that the face of the universe has always existed and never has changed for all eternity. In other words, the total collection of all finite bodies in the universe has existed for all eternity and has always been the same – thus the total sequence of configurations of the universe has always been the same, necessarily in one certain sequence.

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In my view there is a problem with Griffin’s interpretation. It is not clear that Spinoza makes a strong distinction between the infinite mediate modes and God. The lack of a sharp distinction can be better illustrated by considering some passages from Spinoza. In Proposition 11 he writes “God, or substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” In the proof to Proposition 21 he writes “anything in some attribute of God…follows from the necessity of the absolute nature of the attribute, it must necessarily be infinite…that which thus follows from the necessity of the nature of some attribute cannot have a determinate existence, or duration.” In Proposition 21 he is discussing the infinite immediate modes. Compare this to the language he uses in Proposition 22: “Whatever follows from some attribute of God, insofar as the attribute is modified by a modification that exists necessarily and as infinite through that same attribute, must also exist both necessarily and as infinite.” Judging by the language, there seems to be a close connection between God, God’s attributes, the infinite immediate modes, and the infinite mediate modes. In any case, it is certainly a far cry from the language which Spinoza uses to discuss the finite determinate modes. It will be instructive to compare the two ways he discusses the different modes.

The language suggesting a close connection among God, the attributes and the infinite modes can be contrasted with the language used to describe the finite determinate modes. In Proposition 28 he writes “Every individual thing, i.e., anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to act unless it be determined to exist and

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6 Ibid., pg. 231.

7 Ibid., pg. 231.
to act by another cause which is also finite and has a determinate existence…”\textsuperscript{8} In this passage Spinoza closely links finite determinate modes with other finite determinate modes but makes no mention of God or attributes or infinite and eternal modes. In fact, if one were to judge Spinoza’s system from this proposition alone the judgment seemingly would have to be made that the finite and determinate modes produce each other and that they do not depend on God or anything else for their existence. This is obviously not the case, since Spinoza insists that nothing can exist outside of God, but it does suggest that the relationship between God and the finite determinate modes is not nearly as close as the relationship between God and the infinite modes, both immediate and mediate. Griffin seems to lack the strong connection between God and the finite determinate modes that his interpretation needs.

Now I will discuss a strategy that could be effective in establishing Spinoza as a strong necessitarian. It is a strategy that Griffin seems poised to adopt, particularly when he writes "...identifies the infinite individual with the face of the whole universe, then the infinite individual exists at every moment of time...then the existence of the infinite individual is absolutely necessary."\textsuperscript{9} The phrase 'exists at every moment of time' is suggestive of the strategy I will be proposing. This strategy involves interpreting Spinoza as espousing the B-theory of time and being a four-dimensionalist, or at least holding prototype versions of these two views. A complete analysis of this strategy is beyond the scope of this paper; I will outline the strategy and consider some of the stronger points for and against it. A full analysis will have to be left for another time.


The B-theory of time states that there is really no past, present, and future - our perceptions of things being in the past, present, or future is a result of our being at a certain point on a timeline that always exists. All events on the timeline have the same ontological status, they all exist. Time is analogous to space in the B-theory - we happen to be in a certain space within the universe, but the rest of the universe does not cease to exist simply because we are not there. The timeline is similar to space - we just happen to be at a certain point on the timeline (what we refer to as the present), but that doesn't mean that the rest of the timeline either ceases to exist (the past) or has yet to come into existence (the future). The timeline always exists and thus can never change or have been any different than it actually is.

Four-dimensionalism is the view that objects have four dimensions; objects have length, width, depth, and are also extended in time. At any particular point in time only a piece, a time-slice of the object exists and can be perceived. At no time can the entire object be observed (unless it only exists for a moment in time). The complete object is that defined by its spatial dimensions and its existence in time from creation to destruction. In the case of a human, the entire person would be that which occupies certain spatial dimensions and his or her full existence from birth to death. Now let us examine how combining these views could make Spinoza a strong necessitarian.

Combining the two theories, any object on the timeline would extend spatially and temporally and neither the timeline nor the objects on them could change or be any different than they actually are. If neither the timeline nor the objects on it can be any different than they actually are, then it seems that they necessarily are the way they are. This means that the objects must exist (at some point on the timeline) and the configuration of the objects must necessarily be a certain way (otherwise the timeline would change since the sequence of configurations
would change). With the timeline and objects necessarily a certain way, Spinoza would be a strong necessitarian. If arguing for Spinoza as a B-theorist and four-dimensionalist can work, Griffin’s case for Spinoza being a strong necessitarian can succeed.

Is there enough textual support to establish that Spinoza was a B-theorist and four-dimensionalist, even of the proto variety? One of the strongest pieces of textual support occurs in the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*:

Finally, neither time nor duration can be imagined before creation; these began along with things. For time is the measure of duration; or rather, it is nothing but a mode of thinking. Therefore it presupposes not just some created thing, but, in particular, thinking men.10

This passage can be interpreted as suggesting that time does not pass in the way we perceive it to – rather than having a past, present, and future there would just be an eternally existing timeline. It seems reasonable to suppose that time would not be perceived as past, present, and future without someone (like thinking men) to perceive it as such. If this interpretation is correct, it certainly seems to support a B-theorist view of Spinoza.

Another passage supporting this interpretation of Spinoza comes earlier in the same work:

From this it clearly follows that duration is distinguished only by reason from the total existence of a thing. For as much as you take away from the duration of a thing, so much you necessarily take away from its existence. Now in order that duration may be determined, we compare it with the duration of other things that have a fixed and determinate motion, and this comparison is called time. Therefore time is not an affection of things, but a mere mode of thinking, or, as we have previously called it, a being of reason; for it is a mode of thinking serving to explicate duration.11

It is particularly the second sentence which suggests four-dimensionalism. If taking away from a thing’s duration (persistence through time) takes away from its existence, it suggests

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11 Ibid., pp. 185-186.
that duration is an essential feature of the existence of a thing. In other words, it seems to mean
that the duration of a thing is just as much of a feature of a thing as length, width, and depth. If
the duration of a thing cannot be separated from the thing itself, a four-dimensionalist account is
at least strongly implied. There are other passages from Spinoza that could be interpreted as
supporting either the B-theory of time or four-dimensionalism, but as it is only my purpose to
outline the strategy and show that it might work, the two preceding examples from the text will
suffice. It seems clear that Spinoza could be interpreted as a B-theorist and four-dimensionalist.
Now I will consider an objection to this interpretation.

The objection is strong and difficult to overcome. It can be stated like this: the textual
passages were taken not from the Ethics; in the Ethics, where the strongest support for Spinoza
as a strong necessitarian is located, virtually nothing can be found that suggests either a B-theory
or four-dimensionalist view. If Spinoza held the B-theory of time and four-dimensionalism (or
either view for that matter), then why did he not discuss them in the Ethics, where these views
could have established strong necessitarianism? That he did not suggests that Spinoza either did
not hold the B-theory and four-dimensionalist views, or that he was not a strong necessitarian.

In reply, I will point to a proposition in Book I of the Ethics that seems to support the B-
theory/four-dimensionalist/strong necessitarian interpretation. Proposition 33 reads "Things
could not have been produced by God in any other way or in any other order than is the case."\(^\text{12}\)
It is hard to imagine another interpretation of this proposition than as an expression of strong
necessitarianism. However, it may be the case that Spinoza was arguing for strong
necessitarianism without supporting it with the B-theory or four-dimensionalism. Certainly

\(^{12}\) SPINOZA, BARUCH, Complete Works, edited by Michael Morgan, translated by Samuel Shirley. (Indianapolis:
neither view is stated explicitly in the proposition. The best that can be done is to read the views into the proposition - the phrase 'could not have been produced by God in any other way' could indicate a four-dimensionalist view coupled with the B-theory and the phrase 'or in any other order than is the case' could indicate the B-theory of time. The B-theory and four-dimensionalism could be implied in the proposition, but the lack of any explicit mention of either is troubling. Even more troubling is a more glaring omission.

One might reasonably expect Spinoza, if he held the B-theory and four-dimensionalist views, to discuss them at probably the most crucial point in the argument for necessitarianism - Proposition 28 of Book I of the *Ethics*. There is, however, no indication of either view in Proposition 28. Prop. 28 only discusses finite and determinate modes and how they cause each other. There are two main possibilities: Spinoza may have thought strong necessitarianism could be established via his other arguments. This scenario is certainly possible. The second, however, seems more likely, especially given the paucity of textual support for the B-theory and four-dimensionalist interpretation. Without better evidence for Spinoza's support of these views, it seems that it must be accepted that he did not hold these views. In my opinion, this final objection is devastating to the B-theory/four-dimensionalist interpretation of Spinoza. Without this interpretation, Griffin's argument for strong necessitarianism does not work.

In conclusion, Griffin argues against Curley and Walski's interpretation of Spinoza as a moderate necessitarian. In this paper I have raised problems for Griffin's argument for Spinoza as a strong necessitarian, and suggested a strategy that could make Griffin's argument succeed. However, since this strategy does not work, it turns out that Curley and Walski are essentially right. Spinoza is a determinist, not a necessitarian.
