MORE THAN MOST PHILOSOPHERS, Spinoza needed a coherent and sophisticated set of views on the nature of possibility: many of his most important philosophical positions and arguments depended on it. As one example, take Ethics IP33. This Proposition—among the most famous (infamous?) of the Ethics—states, “Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced.” In a salutary attempt to clarify the meaning of IP33 et relata, Spinoza adds in the first Scholium to IP33 that “by these propositions I have shown more clearly than the noon light that there is absolutely nothing in things on account of which they can be called contingent.” Now, such assertions were bound to give rise to
numerous objections and Spinoza knew it. To meet these objections, he immediately proceeds to one of the most powerful: namely, are there not things that actually have been “produced by God” that need not have been “produced by God?” And would it not make sense to call these things “contingent or possible?” In reply, Spinoza reinterprets the concept of possibility. We call existing things “contingent” (or “possible”—here the two notions are not distinguished) “only because of a defect of our knowledge.” There are, he continues, two types of deficiency that lead us to regard existing things as “contingent or possible”: either we do not know “that the thing’s essence involves a contradiction” or we do know that the thing’s essence does not involve a contradiction but we do not know enough about the “order of causes” to affirm anything “certainly about its existence.”

IP33 and attendant Propositions have long posed interpretative challenges; I wish to skirt those problems here, making instead a simple point about the rhetoric of this passage. In it, Spinoza has finished what he takes to be an important proof of a peculiar type of determinism, a conclusion that he realizes will incite controversy. Much of the controversy centers on the concept of possibility; furthermore, the potential consequences of this controversy are enormous. To resolve these problems, Spinoza states his own alternative account of the possible. Although it may not be discussed because of its intrinsic philosophical interest, the concept of possibility is crucial (at least, in Spinoza’s view) to the success or failure of IP33 and, arguably, of the whole Ethics. For unless he can convince his readers of taking the possible a certain way and so convince them to accept IP33, the entirety of his ethical project (which essentially involves reconciling people to the truth of his determinism) will come undone. In this way, then, we can see the pivotal place of the concept of possibility in Spinoza’s philosophy.

3E	extit{thics} IP33S1.

4The centrality of determinism to the \textit{Ethics} is evident from a letter of Spinoza’s to Henry Oldenburg. In an earlier letter, Oldenburg had accused Spinoza of postulating “a fatalistic necessity in all things and actions”; Letter 74, in \textit{Spinoza: The Letters} (henceforth, “\textit{Letters}”), trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995). In reply Spinoza writes, “I see at last what it was that you urged me not to publish. However, since this is the principal basis of all the contents of the treatise which I had intended to issue [referring here to the \textit{Ethics}], I should like to explain briefly in what way I maintain the fatalistic necessity of all things and actions”; Letter 75, in \textit{Letters}. 


In this paper, I delineate Spinoza's main concepts of possibility. I say "concepts," plural, because I think he had two of them: one doxastic, the other metaphysical. These concepts play very different conceptual roles in his philosophy, as we shall see when we look at the evidence for them, and this is one reason why he could maintain them both. One goal of my paper is to unwind the sometimes tortuous (torturous?) presentation of these concepts, to show their distinct yet complementary roles in his philosophical system, and to argue against a reduction or elimination of one concept to or in favor of the other. Another goal is to display the general philosophical significance of and interest in Spinoza's concepts of possibility. By studying them, I contend, we can learn something about our own conceptions of possibility as well as that perennial bogeyman of determinists, the necessitarian.

I

The "TdIE" (1): Comments on "fingere." I begin with what I call Spinoza's doxastic concept of possibility. Of the two concepts of possibility that I will attribute to Spinoza, the doxastic is more well established: it figures in major works from the Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione (henceforth, "TdIE") onward. In the next few sections, I examine its appearances in the TdIE, the Cogitata Metaphysica, and the Ethics, with occasional references to other works. While my primary objective is to expound on this concept of possibility, I also want to show that Spinoza's pronouncements on it were largely consistent, underwent little development, and were regularly deployed to similar ends.\(^5\) For ease of exposition, I proceed chronologically, starting with the TdIE.

\(^5\) In making these scholarly points, I will be correcting a tendency in the literature to discount the significance of doxastic possibility in the Ethics. Examples of this mistake are Bennett, Spinoza's Ethics (who largely ignores doxastic possibility in his book) and Richard Mason (who thinks that Spinoza dropped this concept by the time of the Ethics), "Spinoza on Modality," The Philosophical Quarterly 36, no. 144 (July 1986): 322–3. I will be citing Mason's paper instead of his more recent book, The God of Spinoza (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Mason still seems to stand by the interpretations of his paper (at least, he absorbed most of them unchanged into his book), and since the paper (unlike the book) focuses exclusively on modality, it makes a more natural interlocutor.
In the *TdIE* Spinoza writes,

I call a thing impossible whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it to exist; necessary whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it not to exist; and possible whose existence, by its very nature, does not imply a contradiction—either for it to exist or for it not to exist—but whose necessity or impossibility of existence depends on causes unknown to us, so long as we feign its existence. So if its necessity or impossibility, which depends on external causes, were known to us, we would be able to feign *fingere* nothing concerning it.  

As some commentators have noted, the Latin word *fingere* lies at the heart of the definition of possibility given in this passage: according to Spinoza, those things are possible whose existence we are able to feign. *Fingere* (in all its forms) is the sort of word that gives translators fits. Not only is it deliciously ambiguous (with overlapping meanings ranging from “touch, handle” to “alter, change” to “contrive,” “de-vise, invent” and “suppose, conceive”) but also it was occasionally used semitechnically by Spinoza’s day (for example, in scholastic debates over the so-called *fictum* theory of universals). One might conjecture that the semitechnical connotation of *fingere* would benefit the translator, since he could simply import the semitechnical meaning into the *TdIE* and translate accordingly; but it is hard to substantiate this hunch since we have little evidence that Spinoza was familiar with the relevant scholastic literature and some reason to believe that he either was not aware of or did not care about *fingere*’s semitechnical aspect (for example, the *TdIE* is the only text in which Spinoza focuses his discussion on *fingere*, even though it is not the only text in which he discusses the phenomenon he here calls “feigning,” as we shall see). Since it is equally possible that Spinoza either was or was not placing himself in the tradition by using *fingere*, any translator

---

6“Rem impossibilem voco, cuius natura <in existendo> implicat contradic-tionem, ut ea existat; necessariam, cuius natura implicat contradictionem, ut ea non existat; possiblern, cuius quidem existentia, ipsa sua natura, non implicat contradictionem, ut existat, aut non existat, sed cuius existentiae necessitas, aut impossibilitas pendet a causis nobis ignotis, quamdui ipsius existentiam fingimus; ideoque si ipsius necessitas, aut impossibilitas, quae à causis externis pendet, nobis esset nota, nihil etiam de ea potuissemus fingere”; *TdIE*, §53. Section numbers are not in the original text but have been used by scholars since they were added by Bruder (they are in Curley’s translation).

must decide for himself whether to capture such possible connections in his translation, and this is on top of the basic problem of deciding which meaning is intended.

Complexities such as these may help to explain the plurality of English translations of fingere. Whereas Curley consistently renders fingere and fictum as “feign” and “thing being feigned,” “feigning” or “fiction,” respectively, Eisenberg and Joachim prefer “suppose” and “supposition” or “supposals.” Shirley uses a larger set of words (including “assume,” “engage in any fiction,” “feign,” “supposition,” “fictitious idea”), as does Elwes (“feign,” “hypothesize,” “form fictitious hypotheses,” “fictions”). Each of these translations has its virtues; I will not argue for or against any of them. Instead, I would observe how they all dance around the same pair of ideas. If we are speaking of fingere (that is, the verb), we could say that the pair of ideas is this: on the one hand, believing that p is the case when in fact it is not; on the other, believing without sufficient epistemic warrant that p may be the case, regardless of whether or not p is the case (that is, p’s being the case is immaterial). If we are speaking of a fictum (the noun or participle), the pair, we could say, is this: a thing (idea, proposition, whatever) which is purported to be the case when in fact it is not; or, a thing which is believed without adequate evidence to be the case and may or may not be the case.

The above translators do well to depict these alternatives in their translations, since they are present in the Latin used by Spinoza, as we learn from the lexicographer Goclenius. Although he does not discuss fingere, Goclenius (who wrote a dictionary of philosophical terms that was widely used in the seventeenth century) does have four entries under fictum. Two of them are especially apposite:

All false things are fictions, but not all fictions are false.

---


“Fictitious” is the same as “simulated” or “made up” and is opposed to
genuineness. Fictions are said not to be among [genuine] predications
but still are real beings. Albert the Great dealt with these issues in his
exposition of the hierarchy of the heavens. Although sometimes Angels
appear in borrowed bodies, nevertheless they are sometimes able to ap-
pear in fictitious form in our imagination. The question is, is such a fic-
tion a deception? The answer is “no,” because it has been arranged for
the provision of the truth.\footnote{The Latin is, respectively, “Omnia falsa sunt ficta, sed non omnia ficta
sunt falsa,” and “Fictum idem est, quod simulatum, vel commentitium, & oppo-
ponitur verosita dicuntur ficta non esse in praedicameus, sed tantum vera
Entia. De his Albertus Magn. in expositione coelestis hierarchiae: licet quan-
doque appareant Angeli in assumptis corporibus: possunt tamen in quan-
doque appareere fictis formis in phantasia: talis fictio, an fit deceptio, queri-
tur? Negatur, quia est ordinata ad instructionem veritatis”; Rudolphus
Goclenius, \textit{Lexicon Philosophicum quo tanquam clave Philosophiae fores
aperiuntur} (1613; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung,
1964), 575; my translations.}

Spinoza would not fold all of these ideas into his theory of fictions; for
example, he would reject the idea that fictions are “real beings.”\footnote{See the \textit{Cogitata Metaphysica}, part 1, chapter 1. Here Spinoza both
argues that “Chimaeras, Fictitious Beings, and Beings of reason are not be-
ings,” as well as that “Being is badly divided into real being and being of rea-
son”; Curley, 299, 301.} But
two of them do feature in his analysis and are worth noting now. First
is the idea that some fictions are false and others, true (which, I take
it, is implied by Goclenius’s statement that not all fictions are false).
Spinoza is prepared to grant that some of our feignings are true, yet
still he will argue for their elimination, because they are not products
of the intellect but of the imagination and so cannot possibly be justi-
fied. The second crucial idea is that the intentionality of feignings and
fictitious beings is essential to understanding what they are and how
they function. While Spinoza would not agree that fictions are not
necessarily deceptions, he will exploit the dependence of feignings on
the agent’s intentions—and their independence from the order of real
causes—in his arguments against feigning. These two aspects of the
notion of fiction—present in the various English translations of the
\textit{TDE}—are very important to understanding Spinoza’s analysis of \textit{fingenere} and \textit{ficta} in that work, to which we can now turn, with these pre-
liminary remarks under our belt.
The “TdIE” (2): Possibility as Feigning. In the preceding quote from the TdIE, we found Spinoza saying that things are regarded by us as possible insofar as we are able to feign their existence. From our analysis of fingere, we have learned that feigning is either believing falsely or believing without adequate reason. From these, it follows that things are regarded by us as possible insofar as we harbor false or unjustified beliefs about them. This is a good start; yet, more is needed. For starters, this argument assumes that Spinoza employed the two discussed connotations of fingere, an assumption that cannot pass without examination. Further, as a statement of a concept of possibility, it is not very informative. Finally, it is generic enough to be ascribable to any number of philosophers; we need to see whether Spinoza develops his concept in ways that make it stand out from the rest. In this section, I respond to these problems by filling out doxastic possibility. There are three broad stages to my argument: first, I examine Spinoza’s views on the feigner; then, I analyze some of his proposals for ending feigning; finally, I criticize these proposals in order to expose subtleties in them that will enable us to understand better the notion of doxastic possibility per se.

Feigners can be divided into two groups: God and everything or everybody else. Spinoza begins with God, writing that “if there is a God, or something omniscient, he can feign nothing at all.” Notice that the sole divine property mentioned is omniscience: it is just because of his omniscience that God cannot feign. This is significant, not just because it corroborates the claims I have made about the incompatibility of feigning and knowledge, but also because it gives us the first and most important element of the doxastic concept of possibility: namely, things are regarded as possible, doxastically speaking, insofar as those who regard them as possible do not know enough. Since God knows all there is to know about everything, God can never regard things as possible; rather, he regards them as necessary or—better still—simply, without any concern for their modal status.13

12 "Unde sequitur, si detur aliquis Deus, aut omniscium quid, nihil prorsus eum posse fingere"; TdIE, §54.
13 I interpolate this claim about the absence of modal qualities from God’s knowledge from Ethics VP5: “The greatest affect of all, other things equal, is one toward a thing we imagine simply, and neither as necessary, nor as possible, nor as contingent.”
Concerning all other beings (for simplicity’s sake, let us focus on human beings), however, since we have less than absolute knowledge, we will be susceptible to feigning. Not that we necessarily will feign (more on this shortly), but merely that we might do so. We will tend either to think that things are the case when in fact they are not; or that they may be the case, when a stronger (nonmodal) attitude is required. Our propensity to feign is due to our place in Nature. Spinoza says, “But if it is—as it seems at first—of the nature of a thinking being to form true, or [sive] adequate, thoughts, it is certain that inadequate ideas arise in us only from the fact that we are part of a thinking being, of which some thoughts wholly constitute our mind, while others do so only in part.”14 As finite beings, modifications of infinite substance (in the terminology of the Ethics), we necessarily cannot know all there is to know about everything. Since such complete knowledge is the only guaranteed way always to avoid feigning, we can never escape our tendency to feign.

While complete knowledge serves as one limit of feigning, complete ignorance is the other. That is, if (per impossible) a human being existed who knew nothing, he would be as immune to feigning as God. An example of Spinoza’s will help us to see why: “I feign that Peter, whom I know, is going home, that he is coming to visit me, and the like. Here I ask, what does such an idea concern? I see that it concerns only possible, and not necessary or impossible things.”15 It is necessary for us to know something lest we not possess any propositional attitudes whatsoever. Since feigning is a propositional attitude, we must have some knowledge in order to be able to feign. In the example, if the speaker did not know anything about Peter, he would not be uncertain about Peter’s actions. He would not wonder whether Peter would go home, or come to him, or whatever, because he would not wonder anything about Peter: he could not, since he did not know him. A little bit of knowledge is necessary if one is to feign. In a mem-

14 “Quod si de natura entis cogitantis sit, uti prima fronte videtur, cogitationes versa, sive adaequatas formare, certum est, ideas inadaequatas ex eo tantum in nobis oriri, quod pars sumus alium entis cogitantis, cuius quaedam cogitationes ex toto, quaedam ex parte tantum nostram mentem constituant”; TdIE, §73.
15 TdIE, §52.
orable phrase of Joachim's, "every supposal must fall within a gap of ignorance circumscribed by knowledge." 16

So far we have established (among other things) that we feign because we know something but not everything. Let us now pose the question: how exactly is our partial ignorance responsible for our feigning? Spinoza provides an answer slightly later in the text, 17 where he identifies the following three basic ways that the ignorance resulting from our finitude produces feigning. (1) We know (literally, "the mind knows") "only in part a thing that is a whole, or composed of many things." 18 Anticipating the theory of individuation promulgated in part 2 of the Ethics, 19 Spinoza here points out a problem with that theory not raised in the corresponding passage of the Ethics: namely, if one individual is composed of other individuals, then unless we can know those individuals of which the individual in question is composed, we cannot claim full knowledge of that individual. Given our gross ignorance of the nature of composition—ignorance which is closely tied to the severe limits placed on our ability to know by virtue of our finitude—it would seem to follow that we will regularly tend to assert knowledge claims that are also grossly unjustified or even false. (2) We do "not distinguish the known from the unknown." 20 For God, of course, this would not be a problem, since God knows everything and so he need not bother distinguishing what he knows from what he does not know. We humans are not so fortunate. It is difficult for us to avoid this error, since it is difficult for us to know what it is that we know, and unless we know that (or what) we know, we will have trouble distinguishing knowledge from mere belief. (3) We attend "at once, without any distinction, to the many things that are contained in each thing." 21 This flaw in the way we know is undoubtedly linked to the first. In fact, although Spinoza does not say so, the mind's incomplete knowledge of composite individuals would seem to be one of the causes of the mind's failing to distinguish the "many things . . .

---

17 *TDE*, §63.
18 "mens rem integram, aut ex multis compositam, tantum ex parte noscat."
19 See especially *Ethics* IIP13SD (Curley, 460).
20 "[mens] notum ab ignoto non distinguat."
21 "[mens] praeterea quod ad multa, quae continentur in unaquaque re, simul attendat sine ulla distinctione."
contained in each thing." Being ignorant of the actual constitution of
the individual—in particular, not knowing of what the individual is
made—it is easy for us to make assumptions about the individual that
are either false or not justified (or both). For example, we might mis-
take a composite individual for a simple one. If we do this, we are of
course committing the very error of which Spinoza here speaks.

Although pessimistic about the prospects for the complete eradi-
cation of feigning among creatures who have less than absolute
knowledge (such as humans), Spinoza does not believe that all of us
are necessarily doomed to feign. After all, one of the aims of the TdIE
is to see to it that the intellect (intellectus) "understands things suc-
cessfully."22 Unless he thought that this goal was unrealizable (which
he surely did not), he must have believed it possible for the human in-
tellect to come to see things as they are. Since that is precisely what
is required to reduce and eliminate feigning ("the less the mind under-
stands and the more things it perceives, the greater its power of feign-
ing is; and the more things it understands, the more that power is di-
minished"23), he must at least have regarded the elimination of
feigning as an ideal toward which we can strive. In general, he
thought that this goal was realized when the intellect understands
both Nature as a whole and certain specific parts of Nature. This is
clear from earlier in the TdIE, where he states the following two
"means necessary to attain our end":

(1) To know exactly our nature, which we desire to perfect, and at the
same time,
(2) [To know] as much of the nature of things as is necessary,
    (a) to infer rightly from it the differences, agreements and oppositions
        of things,
    (b) to conceive rightly what they can undergo and what they cannot,
    (c) to compare [the nature of things] with the nature and power of
        man.24

Understanding Nature as a whole—that is, the general principles and
laws of Nature—is beneficial in at least two ways. First, by having
this understanding, the intellect can place the particular object of
knowledge in its causal series and understand how it relates to its
causes and effects. In this way the intellect can learn "the means and

22 TdIE, §16.
23 TdIE, §58.
24 TdIE, §25.
causes, how and why such a thing was done” and so have a “concept, i.e., idea, or [sive] connection of subject and predicate.” Second, understanding the general principles and laws of Nature helps to prevent us from making judgments about what is possible—that is, it helps to keep us from feigning. As examples of how this works, Spinoza writes, “after we know the nature of body, we cannot feign an infinite fly, or after we know the nature of the soul, we cannot feign that it is square.” Conversely, “the less men know Nature, the more easily they can feign many things, such as, that trees speak, that men are changed in a moment into stones and into springs, that nothing becomes something, [and so forth].” The value of understanding the specific parts of Nature lies in the fact that

the more generally existence is conceived, the more confusedly also it is conceived, and the more easily it can be ascribed fictitiously to anything. Conversely, the more particularly it is conceived, then the more clearly it is understood, and the more difficult it is for us, [even] when we do not attend to the order of Nature, to ascribe it fictitiously to anything other than the thing itself.

Sounding a theme to which he will return in his later works, Spinoza insists that the intellect invites trouble by abstracting from particular objects to general states or conditions. In order to complement and secure the necessary view the intellect must take of Nature as a whole, it must also pay attention to the members of nature, especially those members with which it comes into regular contact.

The solution to feigning, then, is partly methodological and partly stemming from the nature of knowledge: if we manage to achieve certain kinds of knowledge, then we will cease both to regard things which are false as true, and to believe things without the proper epistemic license. At this stage, some questions should be asked about a presupposition of this methodology and its view of knowledge. As I have just said, it promises us that if we attain certain kinds of knowledge, then we will cease to feign. We might wonder, though,

---

25 TdIE, §62. The importance of knowing the thing’s causal relations is also stressed later in the TdIE, when Spinoza declares that “true knowledge proceeds from cause to effect”; TdIE, §85.
26 TdIE, §58.
27 TdIE, §58.
28 TdIE, §55.
29 For example, in Ethics IIP40S1–2.
why should knowledge do this? What is it about our knowledge of the nature of body, for example, which ensures that we will stop feigning the possible existence of an infinite fly? Can we not pretend contrary to what we know? Or, do we not often forget the things we know? How, then, can Spinoza justify the bold claims he makes about the potential of his method?

The form, if not the content, of the answer to these questions is easily stated. Spinoza believes that we all have access to at least one true idea. This idea is such that we cannot overlook or forget it. From this idea, we can extract an entire body of knowledge. If the extraction process is conducted along the lines Spinoza recommends, then the ideas derived from the one original idea can be trusted as just as true, necessary, and certain as the original idea itself. Since the extracted body of knowledge has these properties, it is such that it precludes feigning—that is, the person who obtains it will not feign. Such is the basic outline of Spinoza’s answer. Let me now attempt to fill it in.

Spinoza believes that we all “have a true idea.”\(^{30}\) The nature of this true idea and what it means to say that we have (habemus) it remains obscure in the TdIE; it can be better displayed against the more familiar backdrop of the metaphysics, and in particular the substance monism, of the Ethics.\(^{31}\) There we are told that we are modifications of the attributes of the one infinite substance. Now, just as our bodies, which are formed out of a number of simpler bodies, can and should be considered as singular modes of the attribute of extension, so too our minds can and should be considered as singular modes of the attribute of thought, even though they consist of many individual

\(^{30}\)“habemus enim ideam veram”; TdIE, §33. See also §47, where, in the course of responding to “some Skeptic [who] would still doubt . . . the first truth itself,” Spinoza equates this idea with the consciousness of the Skeptic and argues that to deny this first truth is to deny one’s own self.

\(^{31}\) It should not too surprising that some of Spinoza’s statements in the TdIE—especially his more metaphysical ones—are left underdeveloped. For as Joachim reminds us, “in writing the TdIE, he had from the first conceived it as the Introductory Part of a work which was to have, for its main subject, an exposition of his metaphysical theories”; Joachim, Spinoza’s Tractatus, 7 (emphasis in the original). Given the TdIE’s status as the first part of an unfinished multipart opus, it is to be expected that Spinoza will issue some promissory notes in it that he regretfully did not redeem.
thoughts. The principal of unification may be different for the mind than the body: since the mind’s thoughts are not subject to the same laws of physics as the body’s parts, they cannot form an individual in the way that the body’s parts do, by “[communicating] their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner.” But Spinoza does not doubt that the mind is unified into one being or modification all the same: in relation to the attribute of thought of which our minds are modifications, our minds are singular individuals or ideas. These singular ideas which are our minds are what Spinoza is alluding to when he writes that “we have a true idea.” The word choice here may be somewhat unfortunate; the point might have been more clearly expressed if he had said “we are a true idea.” That the ideas which are our minds are true is obvious; as modifications of the attribute of thought, they must be true.

That the ideas which we have are in fact what we are, should hopefully have been clarified by my digression into Spinozistic metaphysics: insofar as we are considered as thinking beings, we are modifications of the attribute of thought. As Joachim says, “The real ground of Spinoza’s assertion that ‘we have a true idea’ is, therefore, plain. To have, or to be, a human mind at all, is to contain (or to be) at least one entire and integral idea of a thinking thing.”

See, for example, Ethics IIP15 and Paul D. Eisenberg’s “How to Understand De Intellectus Emendatione” (henceforth, “De Intellectus Emendatione”), The Journal of the History of Philosophy 9, no. 2 (1971): 171–91. Eisenberg correctly places Spinoza’s conception of the mind between two extremes. On the one side is the idea of the mind as a “receptacle” for the holding or storing of its thoughts, an entity above and beyond all its individual members. On the other is the Humean conception of the mind as “simply a ‘bundle’ or congeries of ideas”; De Intellectus Emendatione, 188.

As Michael Della Rocca argues, however, it does not follow that all ideas must be true. While mind-body parallelism may guarantee that all ideas align with their objects “insofar as they are in God’s mind” and so all ideas relative to God may be true, parallelism “by itself does not carry any implications as to the content of ideas insofar as they are in the human mind”; Della Rocca, Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza (henceforth, “Representation and the Mind-Body Problem”) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108. Ideas may all be true relative to God; relative to individual members of nature, however, ideas may be true or false. Whether they are or not depends on the individual agent—for example, on whether he pursues knowledge in the manner required by the TdIE.

Joachim, Spinoza’s Tractatus, 91.
So we have (or are) one true idea built in us, as it were, or, even better, constituting us. The goal of Spinoza’s method in the *TdIE* is to make this idea—which we know with certainty and which we know that we know\(^{36}\)—the “source of other ideas.”\(^{37}\) He says, “a good Method is one which shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea.”\(^{36}\) Or again, “it is again evident that for our mind to reproduce completely the likeness of Nature, it must bring all of its ideas forth from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature.”\(^{39}\) Although this idea is the font or forms the basis of all our knowledge, it does not by itself guarantee that everyone will acquire the sort of knowledge sought by Spinoza in the *TdIE*. The reason that most of us fail to acquire this knowledge, even though we already have (or are) a necessary ingredient for its acquisition, is that we do not know how properly to utilize our idea. In §44 Spinoza grants that a human being could have “proceeded in this way in investigating Nature, i.e., by acquiring other ideas in the proper order, according to the standard of the given true idea.” If such a person had existed, “he would never have doubted the truth he possessed . . . and also everything would have flowed to him of its own accord.” But, Spinoza continues, “because this never or rarely happens, I have been forced to lay things down in this way, so that what we cannot acquire by fate, we may still acquire by a deliberate plan.”

At this juncture some questions recur. Let us grant to Spinoza that we all have or are a true idea. Let us further suppose that this idea can serve a function analogous to Descartes’s *cogito*, and be the basis or source of all our knowledge. Even if we make these concessions, we still want to know more about the reliability of Spinoza’s method. In particular, we want to know why any ideas derived from the original idea will be true. What ensures that these derivations or deductions will not yield false ideas? Why can we not feign any of

\(^{36}\) *TdIE*, §34. Spinoza continued to accept the so-called K-K thesis in his later work; see *Ethics* IIP21S.

\(^{37}\) *TdIE*, §42. The Latin (with more of the sentence included for context) is, “patet iterum, quod, ut mens nostra omnino referat Naturae exemplar, debeat omnes suas ideas producere ab ea, quae refert originem, & fontem totius Naturae, ut ipsa etiam sit fons caeterarum idearum.”

\(^{38}\) *TdIE*, §43.

\(^{39}\) *TdIE*, §42.
those ideas? Finally, even supposing that the deduction of all our ideas from our original idea is valid, why could we not obtain a consistent and completely false set of ideas?

The last question is the easiest to answer: given that we start with an idea that is necessarily true, and given that part of what it means for this idea to be true is that it correctly depicts a part of Nature, then unless our deductions contain fallacious inferences, the system of beliefs which we obtain via this deductive process cannot itself be consistent yet false. That is, if we follow the method of the *TdIE*, then we cannot derive a whole history of the world that is false. Further, since the method of the *TdIE* preserves the truth of the initial idea from which all other ideas are derived, we can be certain that the subsequent ideas are just as true as the initial one. So our belief in the subsequent ideas will be just as justified as our belief in the first idea. Since it is impossible to derive consistently an entirely false world history, and since we can repose complete confidence in any world history that we do derive by means of Spinoza's method, it is impossible for us to feign consistently a whole history of the world.

To answer the other questions, it will suffice to see what makes Spinoza's method truth-, necessity-, and certainty-preserving. That is, it will suffice to show that any truths derived from the initial truths with which we commence our search for knowledge are assuredly as true, necessary, and certain as the initial truths themselves. A clue as to why this must be the case can be found in the same section where Spinoza states that God cannot feign:

as far as We are concerned, after I know that I exist, I cannot feign either that I exist or that I do not exist; nor can I feign an elephant which passes through the eye of a needle; nor, after I know the nature of God, can I feign either that he exists or that he does not exist. 

Here Spinoza is discussing ideas that cannot be feigned. The point to which I draw attention is the sequence he describes: first we understand the idea, then we cannot feign it (first I know that I exist, then I cannot feign my existence). As this and other passages make clear,

---

40 *TdIE*, §54.

41 For example, see also a footnote to the above sentence, where Spinoza says, "Because the thing makes itself evident, provided it is understood, we require only an example without other proof. The same is true of its contradictory—it need only be examined for its falsity to be clear"; *TdIE*, §54 note s.
understanding is key to Spinoza's account of ideas that cannot be feigned. There are three reasons that understanding is anathema to feigning, one having to do with the intellect itself as it understands things, the second with the logic by which the intellect understands, the third with the things being understood.

Spinoza thinks that the intellect is naturally suited to uncover falsehoods and substantiate truths:

[W]hen the mind attends to a fictitious thing which is false by its very nature, so that it considers it carefully, and understands it, and deduces from it in good order the things to be deduced, it will easily bring its falsity to light. And if the fictitious thing is true by its nature, then when the mind attends to it, so that it understands it, and begins to deduce from it in good order the things that follow from it, it will proceed successfully, without any interruption. 

Using a hypothetico-deductive model, Spinoza conceives of the intellect as setting up ideas as premises in proofs and deriving conclusions from them. Whenever the deductions result in false conclusions, both the conclusions themselves and the premises (ideas) from which they were drawn are rejected; conversely, whenever the deductions result

42 I have deliberately been using vague terms like “things,” “ideas,” “objects,” and so forth, when speaking of the entities which the intellect intellectualizes, in deference to Richard Mason’s persuasive arguments for a de re interpretation of Spinoza’s modalities (see Mason, “Spinoza on Modality,” 318). While I am sympathetic to Mason’s arguments, I hope to present an interpretation of Spinoza’s concepts of possibility that will be attractive to either the de re or the de dicto reading, and so I have been using what I hope will be neutral terminology (some of which have the additional virtue of also being the terminology used by Spinoza).

Here would be a good place to acknowledge my general indebtedness to Mason, who was the first to identify the relevance of such texts as IIP8 for understanding Spinoza’s modalities and who spurred many of the thoughts I am putting forth in this paper. Although there is overlap between Mason’s article and mine, there is little redundancy: he attempts a survey of all Spinoza’s views on modality whereas I am focusing just on possibility, so that I am able to achieve a depth of analysis not available to him. Furthermore, where Mason has already sufficiently studied an aspect of the problem, I have been merely summarizing or citing his findings. Finally, being philosophers, we disagree on various points (at least two of them major).

43 TdIE, §61. See also §104: “when the mind attends to a thought—to weigh it, and deduce from it, in good order, the thing legitimately to be deduced from it—if it is false, the mind will uncover its falsity; but if it is true, the mind will continue successfully, without any interruption, to deduce true things from it.”
in true conclusions, those conclusions are added to the intellect’s body of knowledge and their truth serves as further confirmation of the value of the premises themselves. This quasi-logical model of the operation of the intellect as it understands things is revealing and helps greatly to answer the above questions. Its significance can be appreciated by contrasting Spinoza with Descartes.

Two differences in particular deserve mention. First, the initial truth with which Spinoza’s intellect begins its quest for understanding—the “true idea” that it contains within itself, or that it is—is itself necessary. That is because this true idea is a modification of one of God’s attributes and (as we shall see when we turn to Spinoza’s “metaphysical” conception of possibility below) all such modifications are necessary. The same cannot be said of Descartes’s cogito, as Calvin Normore reminds us,

the cogito itself is not necessary. The cogito is not merely the claim that if I think I exist. This hypothetical claim is no doubt true and may be necessary but cannot ground Descartes’s project. . . . The categorical claim that can and does ground the project is I exist and Descartes grasps this in grasping that he thinks. “I think” and “I exist” are both contingent truths. If they were not, Descartes would be not only immortal but also a necessary being.44

Since the intellect in Spinoza begins with a necessary truth that can be known with certainty and proceeds by an infallible deductive method, both its necessity and certainty can be transferred to the other truths derived from it. Hence all knowledge obtained by Spinoza’s method can be true, necessary, and certain. Such cannot be the case with Descartes. Since the Cartesian agent begins with a truth that is not necessary, it would be quite impossible (in the absence of some extraordinary assumptions) for the knowledge that he obtains by means of this truth to be necessary.

Even if the cogito were as necessary as Spinoza’s initial truth, the modal status of the body of knowledge that we could theoretically obtain from each would differ. This is because Spinoza and Descartes had different conceptions of the nature of valid inference or proof. For Spinoza, if one starts out with necessary premises and performs a

good deduction, then the conclusion will also be necessary. Because he believed that proofs are or should be ampliative—that is, that they can and should provide us with new information not found in the premises—the same is not true of Descartes. In particular, since Descartes's conception of proof was ampliative, it was difficult if not impossible for him to think that the necessity of the premises could be transferred to the conclusion. To quote Normore once again,

We [should] not suppose that deduction in the Cartesian sense preserves necessity. What it does preserve, I suggest, is certainty. If one begins a deduction with “true and known principles” and one proceeds by “a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought in which each individual proposition is clearly intuited”, one reaches conclusions that are “known with certainty”.

There are, then, two grounds for holding that Spinoza thought that all knowledge gained by his method was true, certain, and necessary, and two concurrent ways in which his epistemology diverged from Descartes's: first, because the premises into which the intellect formulates its ideas are necessary; second, because the deductive pro-

---

45 I do not know of a single passage where Spinoza explicitly comments on the nature of proof. This sentence is supported as much by the character of Demonstrations in the *Ethics* as by any direct statement. See, for example, *Ethics* IP21Dem and IP23Dem. One text that comes close to saying explicitly what I want is the “Introduction” to Descartes' Principles of Philosophy, written on Spinoza's behalf by his friend Lodewijk Meyer. In this Introduction (which contains an extended discussion of the value of applying the geometrical method to nonmathematical sciences such as philosophy), Meyer says, “a certain and firm knowledge of anything unknown can only be derived from things known certainly beforehand”; Curley 225. It is true that Meyer does not describe as “necessary” the “things known beforehand,” but that is irrelevant. Since he is here speaking of Descartes's philosophy and the *cogito* (as we just saw) is not necessary, we should not expect Meyer to call the first principles “necessary.” What matters is that Meyer says the certainty of the “things known beforehand” can be transmitted to anything learned from them. Presumably, had Meyer been speaking about Spinoza's philosophy, in which the first principles are both necessary and known with certainty, he would have said that their necessity and certainty is sent to the things we learn from them.


47 Normore, “The Necessity in Deduction,” 445. The internal quotations are from rule 3 of the *Regulae*. 
cess by which the intellect acquires new knowledge is capable of transmitting the necessity and certainty of the premises to its conclusions.

Above I said that there are three reasons why the ideas we understand by following Spinoza's method must be true, certain, and necessary. We have now discussed two of them—namely, the operation of the intellect and its logic. The third pertains to the nature of the ideas themselves. Some ideas are simple, meaning that "Whatever they contain of affirmation matches their concept, and does not extend itself beyond [the concept]." Simple ideas are special, because "if an idea is of some most simple thing, it can only be clear and distinct. For that thing will have to become known, not in part, but either as a whole or not at all." The idea of God, for Spinoza as for most philosophers in the Western tradition, is the idea of an absolutely simple being. As such, it cannot be feigned once it has been understood, because to understand it at all is to grasp all of God's (essential) properties at once, including his necessary existence. Thus Spinoza writes, "nor, after I know the nature of God, can I feign either that he exists or that he does not exist." If we were to situate simple truths in the hypothetico-deductive model of the understanding, they would be akin to tautologies. Nonsimple truths—such as, say, "That Adam thinks"—are not tautologies and so not immediately unfeignable by the understanding. Nevertheless, Spinoza still believes that they can certainly be known to be necessary. This is because, in Spinoza's view, "there is something real in ideas, through which the true are distinguished from the false." True ideas are distinguished from false not primarily because of a difference in the way they relate to the external world—such as, say, that the former "correspond" to the external world successfully whereas the latter do not—but rather "by an intrinsic denomination." For this reason, "the form of the true thought must be placed in the same thought itself without relation to other things." Because true ideas contain their own standards of truth, it is

48 TdIE, §72.
49 TdIE, §63.
50 TdIE, §54.
51 An example given in TdIE, §54 note u.
52 TdIE, §70.
53 TdIE, §69.
54 TdIE, §71.
necessary that when the understanding examines them according to the proper procedure—the procedure which is both natural to it and which Spinoza urges in the TdIE—it will understand them correctly and perceive that they are true.

With that, I end my reconstruction of doxastic possibility in the TdIE. Before proceeding to other texts, I would like to make a point to help pave the way. Spinoza was deeply committed to the notion of doxastic possibility. While it is true that he wanted to rid himself and others of it, he also recognized the (practical) impossibility of complete success. His metaphysics provided him with the reason why: as modes, dependent on substance for our essence and existence, humans necessarily have severe constraints placed on our power of understanding—constraints which we cannot overcome. As he says in the Ethics, “Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or [sive] clear and distinct ideas.”55 While it may be possible for humans to stop feigning altogether,56 most (if not all) of us either will not or cannot make the necessary effort to understand ourselves and our place in Nature. Spinoza’s deep commitment to doxastic possibility helps to explain its prevalence in his writings. Discussed in all of his major works, Spinoza expended much effort demarcating this concept of possibility and apparently believed that much rode on getting his analysis right. Now we know why: since humans will always be susceptible to feigning, it is important to understand precisely what this amounts to. Then we might perhaps mitigate its affects.

III

Possibility and Causation in the “Cogitata Metaphysica.” My discussion of doxastic possibility in the Cogitata Metaphysica

55 Ethics II P36. See also TdIE, §73 (quoted above).
56 If the person who avoids feigning is the same individual whom Spinoza will call a homo liber (“free man”) in the Ethics, then some commentators think that such a person is nonexistent, since the homo liber is an ideal, a “limit” (in Bennett’s words) to be approached by real people but never actually reached. For more, see Bennett, Spinoza’s Ethics, 317; and Don Garrett, “‘The Free Man Always Acts Honestly’: Freedom and the Good in Spinoza’s Ethics,” in Spinoza: Issues and Directions, ed. E. Curley and P.-F. Moreau (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990), 230–1.
(henceforth, "CM") and the Ethics is much briefer, since my aims are more scholarly than philosophical. Principally, I hope to show that Spinoza did retain this concept in both of these works, and that any additions or changes he made to it are not inconsistent with what he has established in the TdIE.

In the CM—the critical appendix to Spinoza's largely expository Descartes' Principles of Philosophy—we can see both the continuity of this conception as well as an innovation. Here Spinoza writes, "A thing is called possible, then, when we understand its efficient cause, but do not know whether the cause is determined. So we can regard it as possible, but neither as necessary nor as impossible." Possibility as a quality of our knowledge, a reflection of us and not the world, is familiar from the TdIE; so is the devaluing of such putative knowledge as only "a defect of our understanding." A new element, or at least an element newly emphasized, however, is the efficient cause that produces the thing we regard as possible. In the TdIE, Spinoza links the perception of things as possible to "causes unknown to us," but he does not reveal the nature of those causes. More importantly, whereas in the TdIE his primary concern is with explaining the nature of our perception of the possible thing—what it means to feign—in the CM he shifts the focus to our lack of knowledge of the cause of the possible thing. This is at least partially explainable by the different projects of the TdIE versus the CM: whereas the former is a methodological treatise designed to "emend" the intellect, the latter is more an exercise in pure metaphysics, with fewer practical ambitions than the other.

The noted changes may be reckoned an enrichment of the concept of possibility from the TdIE but I do not see them departing from it. Witness an application of the definition a few pages later, where Spinoza defends the Proposition that "All things are necessary with respect to God's decree, but it is not the case that some are necessary in themselves, and others with respect to his decree." After stating this Proposition, he considers an objection to it: maybe some but not all things are necessary with respect to God's decree—for example, future events may be things that are not necessitated by God. Using a

---

57 Curley, 308 (emphasis in the original).
58 TdIE, §16.
59 Curley, 332.
Biblical example as fodder for this objection, he writes, “For example, that Josiah would burn the bones of the idolators on Jeroboam's altar. If we attend only to Josiah's will, we shall regard the matter as possible.”60 The necessity attached to future contingents surely differs, the objection continues, from the necessity by which “the three angles of a triangle must equal two right angles,” which “the thing itself shows” to be true.61

Spinoza’s response should be familiar to the reader of the TdIE (and this paper): “Those who say this surely feign distinctions in things out of their own ignorance. For if men understood clearly the whole order of Nature, they would find all things just as necessary as are all those treated in Mathematics. Yet because this is beyond human knowledge, we judge certain things to be possible, but not necessary.”62 Once again, possibility is analyzed as a doxastic concept but not one with a basis in the things that exist. The same is true of the official account of possibility in the Ethics.

IV

Doxastic Possibility in the “Ethics.” In my introduction, I quoted Ethics IP33S1, where Spinoza explains that a thing is called “contingent or possible” just insofar as “the order of causes is hidden from us.” This turns out to be a provisional account of these concepts; at the beginning of part 4 the contingent is distinguished from the possible in these two Definitions:

D3: I call singular things contingent insofar as we find nothing, while we attend only to their essence, which necessarily posits their existence or which necessarily excludes it.

D4: I call the same singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce.

In IP33S1 I drew no distinction between the possible and the contingent, because there was no need to distinguish them accurately.63

60 Curley, 332.
61 Curley, 332.
62 Curley, 332.
A couple of differences between these Definitions and Spinoza's earlier statements concerning doxastic possibility (especially those of the *TdIE*) should be noticed. First and most important, these Definitions do not disparage the concepts of possibility and contingency as born from the weakness of our minds. This stands to reason, since in the *Ethics* Spinoza no longer believes that the mind needs purification, as he did in the *TdIE*. Indeed, extending an idea first seriously vetted in the *CM*, Spinoza in the *Ethics* acknowledges the limitations of our intellects. For example, he argues in the preface to part 5 that the Mind "does not have an absolute dominion over them [the affects]," that Descartes and the Stoics were wrong to think that "we can command [the affects] absolutely" and "there is no Soul so weak that it cannot—when it is well directed—acquire an absolute power over its Passions." A second conspicuous difference: there are separate definitions for possibility and contingency, concepts that tended to run together in the *TdIE*. Apart from these two changes, however, Spinoza in the *Ethics* does not add or subtract anything from the definition of the concept of doxastic possibility itself.

This is most evident in the applications of these Definitions. Earlier, I promised to discuss the use Spinoza made of his various formulations of doxastic possibility. Examining the way they are used is one good way to test their consistency, for if we found inconsistencies in use, then it would likely be the case that there are significant and possibly inconsistent variations in meaning. Now, in the *TdIE* Spinoza presents his account of the possible as an explanation of what people could really mean when they say that something is possible and not necessary or impossible. Further, he analyzes the different ways in which things can be believed to be possible, in order to show that no real (that is, metaphysical) possibility can be known to obtain. The
point of this exercise is to convince his readers of the truth of determinism, which they must begin to accept if they are to attain their highest good. Very similar use is made in the Ethics of the doxastic concept of possibility. I have already recounted IP33, where Spinoza argues that possibility should be conceived not as a metaphysical concept but an epistemological one. The definitions of part 4 second this claim. In the one significant use of the definitions—IVP12Dem—Spinoza continues to insist that possibility and contingency are modes of perception and not real properties.

V

Nomological Possibility: The Theory. As indicated in my opening remarks, and as we have seen from our review of his use of it, Spinoza made specific recourse to his doxastic concept of possibility. Usually he introduced and argued for it either as part of an argument for determinism and/or against indeterminism or in his moral philosophy. In my opinion, because he invoked his doxastic concept of possibility in this manner, wielding it to narrowly circumscribed ends, Spinoza refined this concept into an easily statable doctrine. Because the next concept of possibility I am going to discuss did not fulfill the same (or even very similar) function in his thought, it is not nearly as well developed. Or rather, that is one reason for its comparative opacity; the other is that it was in many respects more important.

There are two stages to my argument: first, I briefly state what I take this concept of possibility to be; then, I argue at greater length for its attribution to Spinoza.

The idea behind this concept of possibility is fairly straightforward: all and only those things are possible that the laws of nature could permit to exist or happen. That is, things can be the case only insofar as they conform to or are compossible with the laws of nature. Given that the laws of nature allow more things to be the case than actually were, are, or will be the case, one important consequence of this theory is that the realm of the possible exceeds that of the actual. On the other hand, since more things are conceivable than are com-

65 TdIE, §49.
possible with the laws of nature, a second important consequence of this theory is that the realm of the possible is more narrowly defined than that of the conceivable. In recognition of the centrality of the laws of nature, I call this a nomological concept of possibility.

A few examples will serve to illustrate it. According to this concept of possibility, on the assumption that the laws of nature alone do not fix which direction a leaf falls when it leaves the tree (causal factors are also relevant), it would have been possible for the leaf to go this direction even if it actually went in that one. On the other hand, depending on how inviolable and universal we take the self-preservation instinct to be, it may be impossible for a creature to seek its own destruction. Why? Because if it is an exceptionless law of nature that “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being,” then since seeking one’s own destruction would violate this law of nature, it is impossible for one to seek one’s own destruction. Finally, assuming that laws of nature do not allow for the existence of mermaids, then even though we might believe that mermaids could exist, this should not be taken for a real (that is, metaphysical) possibility; at best, it is simply an act of the imagination.

VI

Nomological Possibility: The Evidence. Now I shall argue that Spinoza held the concept of nomological possibility in the Ethics and elsewhere. Due to spatial constraints, I will only offer two main pieces of textual evidence (presented in outline form, for ease of exposition).

A. Certain texts strongly suggest that Spinoza admitted some degree of reality to nonexistent things. One of these is Ethics IIP8: “The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be

---

66 Ethics IIP6: “Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.” Whatever Spinoza takes a law of nature to be, and whatever other laws of nature he may have identified, there can be little doubt that the so-called Conatus doctrine counts as a law of nature. Thus he writes in chapter 16 of the Theological-Political Treatise that “it is the supreme law of Nature that each thing endeavours to persist in its present being, as far as in it lies, taking account of no other thing but itself”; Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 179.
comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes. IIP7 should be read against the backdrop of IIP7 (“The order and connections of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”), wherein Spinoza proposes his renowned doctrine of mind-body parallelism. One important question that arises in response to parallelism concerns the status of ideas that cannot be correlated to bodies (examples might be false sensations, mermaids, or ways things could have been). Spinoza must either deny that there are such ideas (an uncomfortable position to occupy) or provide an account that preserves parallelism. Opting for the latter, Spinoza advances IIP8, with its “ideas of singular things . . . that do not exist” and their “comprehension” in God’s “infinite idea,” a comprehension that is the “same” as the “containment” in God’s attributes of the “formal essences of the singular things.”

Now, talk of “ideas of singular things . . . that do not exist” sounds to me like talk of nonactualized possibilities, but I grant that IIP8 is very obscure. As further proof of my reading, let us look at the Scholium to this Proposition, where Spinoza attempts to shed light on it:

the circle is of such a nature that the rectangles formed from the segments of all the straight lines intersecting in it are equal to one another. So in a circle there are contained infinitely many rectangles that are equal to one another. Nevertheless, none of them can be said to exist except insofar as the circle exists, nor can the idea of any of these rectangles be said to exist except insofar as it is comprehended in the idea of the circle.

In this example (which Curley rightly calls “an analogy”), the things I am taking to be like nonexistent particulars are the infinitely many rectangles contained within a circle. Since these have not actually been constructed, they cannot be said to exist. Yet they are contained within the circle and could, if some series of causes were to lead to

---

67 “Ideae rerum singularium, sive modorum non existentium ita debent comprehendi in Dei infinitâ, ideâ, a rerum singularium, sive modorum essentiae formales in Dei attributis continentur.”
68 “Nempe circulus talis est naturae, ut omnium linearum rectarum, in eodem sese invicem secantium, rectangula sub segmentis sint inter se aequalia; quare in circulo infinita inter se aequalia rectangula continentur: attamen nullum eorum potest dici existere, nisi quatenus circulus existit, nec etiam alicuius horum rectangulorum idea potest dici existere, nisi quatenus in circuli ide, comprehenditur.”
their construction, come to exist. The presence of the rectangles within the circle makes these rectangles like possible objects. Just like possible objects, whether or not any of the rectangles actually comes to exist is irrelevant to their status as possibly existing things. Now, these rectangles are supposed to be analogous to something else; in particular, they are supposed to be analogous to “the ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist.” Given the analogy, and given that the rectangles are akin to possibly existing yet actually nonexisting things, it follows that the ideas of singular things that do not actually exist have a status as possibly existing things.

A final point: we could say that the laws of extension enable the construction of “infinitely many rectangles” within the circle. That is, the nonexistent yet possible rectangles are possible just because as the laws of extension would allow their existence; and they are nonexistent just because no cause has made them to exist. Insofar as the situation of the circle/rectangle is analogous to that of God’s infinite idea/nonexistent particulars, then the nonexistent particular is possible just because the laws of God’s infinite idea would allow its existence. This observation connects to what has already been said Spinoza’s theory of nomological possibility and helps to move us onto the other piece of text I will discuss.

B. Ethics IIA1 has long troubled commentators. It reads: “The essence of man does not involve necessary existence, i.e., from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist.” In itself, this Axiom does not seem strange—indeed, it probably strikes most readers as genuinely axiomatic. It only appears strange when taken in conjunction with the later propositions of part 1. Those propositions (such as IP29 and 33) seem to require that this or that man either necessarily exists or necessarily does not exist. The tension is greatest between the explanatory clause of IIA1—“from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist”—and the conclusion of IP33Dem, that “things could have been produced in no other way and no other order, etc.” How Spinoza could advance such different hypotheses in the space of a few pages is puzzling and has led to a

70 Ethics IIIP8.
71 “Hominis essentia non involvit necessariam existentiam, hoc est, ex naturae ordine, tam fieri potest, ut hic, & ille homo existat, quàm ut non existat.”
variety of solutions. A tempting one—that in essence discards IIA1 as an unfortunate oversight—is problematic for many reasons, not least because it ignores IIA1’s deductive progeny. For example, in the course of proving IIP10—which states that “The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man”—Spinoza invokes IIA1 to show the absurdity of man’s existing necessarily.72 IIA1 evidently belongs in the Ethics; our task is to determine what to make of it. Here we face a choice: either we say that Spinoza contradicts himself with it or not. Some commentators have opted for the former;73 I prefer the latter. If we grant that Spinoza is not contradicting himself, then we must explain why not. The simplest explanation, it seems to me, is to admit that IIA1 allows for nonactualized possibilities and then to find some way of reconciling it with texts like IP29 and 33. My interpretation of Spinoza’s metaphysical concept of possibility as nomological allows us to do this in the following way: Things that do not exist may be said to be possible just in case they conform to or are compatible with the order or laws of nature. Since the existence of this or that man is normally compatible with the laws of nature, even if he does not actually exist, he may be said to be a possible existent. Yet, it can still be necessary for the man to exist (or not), if the order of causes found in nature necessitates his existence (or nonexistence).74

One way to understand my interpretation is as taking Spinoza to have severed the link between necessity and impossibility, on the one hand, and possibility, on the other, and then to have assigned different theoretical work to each.75 Necessity and impossibility invariably concern the existence or nonexistence of things: if they exist, they exist necessarily; if they do not exist, their existence is impossible. With the exception of God, the existence of nothing else in Nature is neces-

72 See also Ethics IIP11Dem and IIP30Dem. The importance of IIA1 is further suggested by its early appearance in the part of part 2 where Spinoza actually begins to employ the definitions and axioms of part 2. I am not the first to notice that it is only in IIP10 that Spinoza starts citing the definitions and axioms of part 2, material from part 1 (definitions, propositions, axioms, and so forth) provide all the external support through the first nine propositions of part 2. The fact that Spinoza draws upon IIA1 as soon as he gets to the new material of part 2 indicates just how intimately connected IIA1 to the ideas of part 2: it is needed to make deductions beyond those permitted by part 1.

73 So Bennett, who sees “what looks like an inconsistency in [Spinoza’s] text” between IP11D2 and IIA1 (Spinoza’s Ethics, 121).
sary by virtue of its essence. The reason is that only God's essence contains existence. Yet other things still exist necessarily. How can this be? Because other things are produced by an order of causes (ordo causarum), this order of causes is itself necessary, and this order of causes necessitates the existence (or nonexistence) of things.

In various places, Spinoza explicitly makes the order of causes and not mere compatibility with the laws of nature responsible for the existence of individual things. For example, in the TdIE he says that "everything that happens happens according to the eternal order, and according to certain laws of Nature." There are two requirements for something's happening: it must accord with the eternal order of Nature, as well as Nature's laws. While he does not explain in TdIE §12 what he means by "eternal order," other passages can help. For instance, take IP8S2:

> if 20 men exist in nature . . . , it will not be enough . . . to show the cause of human nature in general; but it will be necessary in addition to show the cause why not more and not fewer than 20 exist. For (by III) there must necessarily be a cause why each exists. But this cause (by II and III) cannot be contained in human nature itself, since the true definition of man does not involve the number 20. So (by IV) the cause why these 20 men exist, and consequently, why each of them exists, must necessarily be outside each of them.

---

74 The phrase Curley translates as "order of causes" in IP33S1—where Spinoza commits himself to the necessary existence of all things—is "ordo causarum," and the phrase he renders as "order of nature" in IIA1—where Spinoza commits himself to the possibility of nonexistent things—is "ordo naturae." The difference in choice of words can help us see what needs distinguishing: namely, the causal series of which all and only existing things are members, versus the broader order of nature, of which both existing and nonexisting things are members. This distinction goes back to Spinoza's early work. In the TdIE, he argues that "everything that happens happens according to the eternal order, and according to the laws of Nature"; TdIE, §12. While the terminology is different, nonetheless Spinoza is seen to be separating the eternal order of Nature from Nature's laws (for more on this text, see below).

75 Here I endorse Richard Mason's conclusion that necessity and possibility are not fully interdefinable for Spinoza; see Mason, "Spinoza on Modality," 327. Such a view is not, of course, without historical precedent; Aristotle, for one, briefly entertains it in chapter 12 of De Interpretatione.

76 Ethics IP11 and IP24.
77 Ethics IP29, 33.
78 TdIE, §12.
79 The Roman numerals are Spinoza's and refer to points internal to the Scholium. See also Ethics IP11AltDem.
If we only considered human nature, we would find that many humans could exist, since the existence of many humans is compatible with nature's laws. If we want to know why a certain number of humans exist, or why these particular humans do, then we must consult the order of efficient causes that produced them. Necessity and impossibility are thus conjoined to account for the existence (or nonexistence) of everything, God and creatures alike. If something exists, it exists necessarily; if it does not exist, its existence is impossible. The concept of possibility is not related at all to these concepts. What could it pertain to? My answer: conformability with the order of nature—that is, conformability with Nature's laws.\textsuperscript{80}

So, for everything except God, there are two requirements for existence: a non-self-contradictory essence (which is one way of saying that the thing must be compatible with the laws of nature; see below) and a particular cause or set of causes. For something to be merely possible, however, it must merely be compatible with the laws of nature.

VII

Logical Possibility. It will be noticed that I have said nothing about what might be called "broadly logical possibility." Informally, this concept might be construed along Leibnizian lines as "truth in some possible world"; more formally, it might be the concept of possibility in the modal system S5, wherein all worlds are accessible to all other worlds, so that the truth of a proposition $p$ in some world $w$ in system $s$ entails that $p$ is possible in all other worlds in $s$. If expressed in such terms, there is an obvious reason why Spinoza would have rejected such a concept of possibility: namely, because he did not employ the concept of possible worlds on which it essentially relies. This is not as innocent as it might at first seem, but it should not bring the current line of inquiry to a complete halt. We could recast

\textsuperscript{80}Spinoza postulates the incommensurability of possibility and impossibility in several places. The most explicit of these is in Descartes' Principles of Philosophy, part 1, proposition 7, scholium, where he says, "there is nothing in common between the possible and the impossible, or [sive] between the intelligible and the unintelligible, just as there is nothing in common between something and nothing"; Curley, 249. See also the CM, part 1, chapter 3 (Curley, 306, 308); TdIE, §52; Ethics IP29Dem.
"broadly logical possibility" in terms that do not involve possible worlds and then ask what Spinoza might say about this reformulated conception. For example, we might consider any proposition broadly logically possible that does not violate the axioms of logic—thus, it is broadly logically possible that a person should jump over the moon. This may seem a weak concept of possibility—it may seem mostly to serve as the limit of what we would consider possible—but it also seems comprehensible enough and it was certainly important to twentieth century philosophy. Why has it not been discussed in this paper?

My reply relies on an ambiguity in the notion of the "axioms of logic" that determine the scope of broadly logical possibility. Of what, exactly, are they supposed to be axiomatic? What is their basis or ground? In the twentieth century, these questions typically were taken to be about the dependence or independence of logical truths on language per se; in the context of the early modern period, they would be about the connection between logic and thought. Thus, reformulated in seventeenth century terms, the question could be: are the logical axioms true in virtue of the nature of thought itself, or in virtue of something else? For Spinoza, who believed there is nothing outside of Nature, the answer must be: Thought (with a capital "T" to denote clearly the reference to Deus sive Natura's attribute, Thought). It is the logical axioms that set the parameters on modifications of Thought; ideas (modes of Thought) are possible just in case they do not violate the axioms of logic. Cast in such terms, the logical axioms seem to be the Thought-analogues to the laws of physics which are among the basic laws of Extension; in fact, I think that the analogy is very apt—that is, I think that the logical axioms are akin to laws of Thought. If it is the case that the axioms of logic are among the basic laws of Thought, then we can ask: what are the laws of Extension that are parallel to those supposed laws of Thought—those logical axioms—that make us believe it possible for people to jump over moons? This question is sanctioned by the doctrine of mind-body parallelism, which requires that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." If there are laws of Thought that would allow for the possibility of people jumping over moons, then there must be laws of Extension that allow for the same. Since (to the best of our knowledge) there are no such laws of

81 Ethics IIP7.
Extension, it follows by *modus tollens* that there are no such laws of Thought, either. So, on Spinozistic grounds, putative logical possibilities like people jumping over moons are not real possibilities at all; they are something else, probably acts of the imagination.82

The upshot is not that Spinoza would deny the existence of a category of possible things or truths that are describable as broadly logically possible. It is rather that he would define this category less expansively than is currently fashionable. In common with many of us, Spinoza could say that to be broadly logically possible is to be compossible with the axioms of logic. However, he would add, to be compossible with the axioms of logic is to be compossible with the laws of Thought. Since the laws of Thought are the laws of Nature (considered as a thinking being), broadly logical possibility in Spinoza’s philosophy turns out to be synonymous with nomological possibility, as I have described it. Thus there is a set of possibilia that could be called “broadly logically possible”; this set is identical with the set of possibilia that are nomologically possible.83

I think that Spinoza, as part of his project of naturalizing philosophy, naturalized the concept of possibility, with the result that the possible is that which could occur in Nature.84 What could (the verb is deliberately in the subjunctive, not indicative, mood) occur within Nature is that which the laws of Nature countenance. The laws of Nature countenance many things—many more than actually were, are, or will be the case—so this conception of possibility is not as narrow as it may at first seem. Nonetheless it does classify as strictly impossible such things as a person jumping over the moon since (at least according to our present understanding of the laws of Nature) it would

82 By saying that notions like people jumping over the moon are products of the imagination, I mean that the mind assembles different ideas or images which it has accumulated from past experiences into one whole. See IIIP17CorDem.

83 Bennett makes a similar but not identical point by arguing that Spinoza “does not make the distinction” between causal and logical possibility (*Spinoza’s Ethics*, 30). We agree in thinking that Spinoza does not recognize what I have called the broadly logically possible as a separate category. We disagree, however, in at least two ways: one, because Bennett does not differentiate causal possibility from nomological; two, because he thinks that Spinoza eliminated logical possibility by strengthening causal possibility, whereas I see logical possibility as equivalent to nomological possibility. For an interesting criticism of Bennett on this head, see Alan Donagan, *Spinoza* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 73–5.
not be nomologically possible for any human to complete such an action. Thus, my Spinoza would bite the bullet, as it were, and classify as impossible many things that we tend nowadays to think of as possible.85

VIII

Possibility and Necessitarianism. Recent critical work has resulted in persuasive enough arguments for taking Spinoza to be a necessitarian that, in my opinion, a constraint on any interpretation of Spinoza’s views on possibility must be that it is compatible with necessitarianism. If I am not mistaken, mine meets this requirement.

On my interpretation of Spinoza, the actual world is the only possible world, because the ordo causarum (which necessitates the existence of everything) is itself necessary. Nothing that is a part of this world could not be a part of it (including the ordo causarum itself); and conversely, nothing that is not a part of this world could be a

84 Here Mason and I are in partial agreement. He says, “There is no scope in [Spinoza’s] system for a distinction between what can be conceived as possible (as we might wish to say logically) and what is causally or practically possible. . . . To be possible cannot be to exist or to subsist in some shadow-realm of possibilities, but is simply an available outcome within the framework of nature and natural law. . . . Possibilities become what is possible—what can happen—in a literal way”; Mason, “Spinoza on Modality,” 325–6. Our agreement is only partial, because Mason thinks that Spinoza’s conception of (metaphysical) possibility is delimited by two factors (the laws of nature and the series of causes of nature), whereas I think there is only one (which is, of course, the laws of nature).

85 Spinoza states almost verbatim in the Political Treatise the view I am here attributing to him. He writes, “nature is not bounded by the laws of human reason, . . . but other infinite laws [natura non legibus humanae rationis . . . continetur, sed infinitis aliis], which regard [respiciunt] the eternal order of universal nature, whereof man is an atom; and according to the necessity of this order only are all individual beings determined in a fixed manner to exist and operate”; Spinoza, Political Treatise, chap. 2, §8; in The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza: Volume II, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 294–5. (I have made slight adjustments to the translation.) Because human reason is not subject to the limitations of universal nature, it is able to conceive things that are unnatural (such as unicorns). At the same time, nature’s boundaries are set by its “infinite laws” alone, not by both laws and the causal series. The conjunction of those two is responsible for a much narrower set of phenomena: namely, what actually exists or occurs.
part of it. It does not necessarily follow (for Spinoza or anyone else), though, that all possible particulars are existent. Why not? Because there could be particulars that are possible, insofar as the laws of nature do not necessarily prohibit their existence, and yet do not and could not exist, because the causal order does not allow them to exist. If I am correct, Spinoza concedes such nonexistent particulars in passages such as the beginning of part 2 of the *Ethics*. So he is at once an advocate of universal necessity and a defender of nonexistent possibles or particulars. Even though this reading is not sanctioned by the usual formulations of necessitarianism, I see no reason not to call one a necessitarian who believes that everything in the world is absolutely necessary, even if he accepts nonexistent particulars. So I take Spinoza to be a necessitarian and a believer in nonexistent possibles.

**IX**

**Conclusion: On the Coherence of Spinoza's Possibilities.** I have attempted to map out some of Spinoza's modalities, not all of them; for instance, I have said next to nothing about his concepts of necessity. Other questions have surfaced about the nature and modal status of laws of nature, the "original condition" from which the world "emerged," and the significance of his views on modality for his ethics. In a more complete discussion, I would be able to address all of

---

86 In the Spinoza literature, there tend to be two formulations of necessitarianism: one based on the idea of possible worlds and holding that there is only one possible world—the actual one; another based on the idea of necessary truths and holding that all truths are necessary. For examples of the former, see Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 54; Edwin Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 83; Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism," in *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics*, ed. Y. Yovel (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991), 192; and Bennett, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 111. For examples of the latter, see Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem*, 95; and Bennett, *Spinoza's Ethics*, 111. I should remark, if only as an aside, that it can be proven with standard Kripke-style semantics for formal modal logic that these two formulations are not logically equivalent in all settings.

87 One reason I do not feel remiss about ignoring necessity is that Spinoza's views on it have received vastly more scholarly attention than his views on possibility. Besides the work already cited, see also John P. Carriero's "Spinoza's Views on Necessity in Historical Perspective," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 47-96.
these. Nevertheless, here I will conclude with some thoughts on just one question. So far, I have sketched two concepts of possibility and argued for the attribution of each to Spinoza. This gives rise to the obvious and important question: how could Spinoza have two concepts of possibility without stumbling into philosophical confusion and incoherence? Several thoughts.

First, it must be noticed that when Spinoza in the *Ethics* and elsewhere speaks of possibility in the doxastic terms I have described, he usually refers to actually existing things and not the nonexistent particulars that I have argued also belong to his system. (Recall, for example, the official definition of possibility in IVD4: "I call . . . singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them.") His doxastic concept of possibility thus concerns the degree of knowledge we have toward one type of particular—the existent particular; it does not reveal anything about things that do not exist (if such there be). Since on my reading Spinoza does allow for nonexistent particulars, any theory about the modal status and, in particular, the possibility of such things would therefore not conflict with his statements about existent things.

Further, in key respects my Spinoza could still be said to allow for only one possible set of existing things: the actual set. Even though there are nonexistent particulars that are possible because they do not conflict with the laws of nature, these things could never exist because they are not part of the causal order of nature. So, necessarily, nonexistent particulars do not exist. As for existent particulars, they clearly are compatible with nature's laws. Being also a part of the natural causal chain, it is a true proposition that necessarily, existent particulars exist. Given that necessarily, nonexistent particulars do not exist and necessarily, existent particulars do exist, it was reasonable for Spinoza to denigrate the belief that existent things are possible as defective knowledge. Existent things are not possible; they are necessary.

Finally, there is the vastly different usage of the two concepts of possibility. The nomological concept is basically a consequence of Spinoza's views on causation, laws of nature, and existence; it does not feature prominently in his philosophy (as proven by the relative paucity of texts in which it appears). The doxastic concept, though, is crucial. If Spinoza could convince his readers to accept as necessary
all existent particulars, then he could significantly advance his ethical objectives, for the actual ethics of the Ethics is predicated on the existence of a universal and eternal metaphysical determinism. Unless people come to see the necessity in Nature, they cannot come to embrace the ideal of the good life adumbrated in the Ethics. While we ought to regard Deus sive Natura as free, our attitude toward him/it must be unique, because he/it is the only thing that satisfies both conditions for freedom. For everything else, it is better to regard that thing as necessary than as possible or contingent. Given these ethical doctrines, it made rhetorical sense for Spinoza to emphasize the doxastic concept of possibility. Given the basic compatibility between the two (as argued above), he could do so without the risk of inconsistency.

University of Toronto

88 *Ethics* VP5.
89 *Ethics* ID7.
90 *Ethics* VP6.
91 An early version of this paper was read at the November 1999 meeting of the South-Central Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy in College Station, Texas; thanks to all present for their comments. Thanks also and especially to Calvin Normore and Brad Inwood.