

Spinoza on *Causa Sui*

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The very first line of Spinoza's magnum opus, the *Ethics*, states the following surprising definition:

By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing [*Per causam sui intelligo id, cujus essentia involvit existentiam, sive id, cujus natura non potest concipi, nisi existens*].

As we shall shortly see, for many of Spinoza's contemporaries and predecessors the very notion of *causa sui* was utterly absurd, akin to a Baron Munchausen attempting to lift himself above a river by pulling his hair up. How can a thing cause itself into existence, if before the causal activity, the cause did not exist at all? Indeed, in one of his earliest works, Spinoza himself claimed: "No thing, considered in itself, has in itself a cause enabling it to destroy itself (if it exists), or to make itself [*te kunnen maaken*] (if it does not exist)" (KV II 26 | I/110/14–16). Moreover, in other early works, Spinoza refers to God as an "uncreated thing" (TIE §97) or "uncreated substance" (CM II 1 | I/237/20), and not as a cause-of-itself as in the *Ethics*. What made Spinoza desert the common, traditional, view of God as the uncaused first cause, or uncreated substance, and adopt instead the apparently chimerical notion of God as *causa sui*?

A very likely explanation for this development suggests that Spinoza's rationalism, his commitment to the principle that everything must have a reason both for its existence and for its non-existence – a commitment stated clearly both in the *Ethics* (see, for example, E1p8s2 and E1p11d2), and in Spinoza's other writings (see, for example, Ep. 34 (IV/179/29)) – made him realize that the notion of an uncreated, or uncaused, thing is of no use for him: if everything *must* have a cause, then the first cause, or the most fundamental being, *must* be a cause-of-itself.

All this is well and good, but we should not let Spinoza off the hook so easily, for the immediate question which arises now is whether Spinoza is not simply cheating his readers. Does Spinoza have a reason – i.e. argument – that could convince us that *causa sui* is indeed a more adequate characterization of God and not merely an opportunistic and ad hoc façade for the good old uncaused cause? While there are many important questions surrounding Spinoza's notion of *causa sui*, it is the last question which will be the focus of this short chapter.

In the first part of this chapter, I study, briefly, Descartes' engagement with the notion of *causa sui*. In the second part, I show that Spinoza understood the causation of *causa sui* as efficient, and not formal, causation. The third and final part will attempt to locate precisely the alleged problem with the notion of *causa sui*, and consider how could Spinoza defend the intelligibility of this notion. Regrettably, limitations of space will force us to leave the examination of Spinoza's closely related notion of being-conceived-through-itself [*per se concipitur*] for another occasion (cf. Melamed and Lin 2018, pp. 11–13).

1. *Causa sui* in Descartes

Proving the existence of God was the stated aim of Descartes' Third Meditation (AT VII 14 | CSM II 10). In the course of developing his proof, Descartes noted that whatever "derives its existence from oneself [*a se*]. . . is itself God [*illam ipsam Deum esse*]" (AT VII 49–50 | CSM II 34). Addressing this claim, Johannes Caterus, a Dutch theologian and the author of the First Set of Objections appended to the *Meditations*, asked Descartes whether by describing God's existence as being "from itself" he used the expression as "everyone takes the phrase," namely, as merely indicating that God is not caused by another, or whether, alternatively, Descartes positively meant that God is its own cause, and thus "bestows its own existence upon itself" (AT VII 95 | CSM II 68. Cf. Douglas 2015, pp. 75–78). Caterus continued his critique by arguing that the traditional, negative sense of being "from itself" is ill-fitted for yielding the conclusion Descartes attempted to derive. Caterus did not elaborate on the alternative, positive sense of the phrase, as he apparently considered it absurd, and thus wished to avoid ascribing it to Descartes. But here awaited him a surprise.

Responding to Caterus' query Descartes writes:

I did not say that it was impossible for something to be the efficient cause of itself. This is obviously the case when the term 'efficient' is taken to apply only to causes which are prior in time to their effects, or different from them. But such a restriction does not seem appropriate in the present context. First, it would make the question trivial, since everyone knows that something cannot be prior to, or distinct from, itself. Second, the natural light does not establish that the concept of an efficient cause requires that it be prior in time to its effect. On the contrary, the concept of a cause is, strictly speaking, applicable only for as long as the cause is producing [*producit*] its effect, *and so it is not prior to it*. However, the light of nature does establish that if anything exists we may always ask why it exists; that is, we may inquire into its efficient cause, or, if it does not have one, we may demand why it does not need one. (AT VII 108 | CSM II 78; italics added)

Descartes' response to Caterus is pretty simple: he denies that efficient causation must be spread in time. In fact, he argues, in its strict sense, efficient causation *requires* that the cause and its effect are concurrent. Thus, one major obstacle to the possibility of efficient self-causation seems to be removed. At this point, Descartes is ready to launch a counter-attack on those who deny the possibility of self-causation.

Hence, if I thought that nothing could possibly have the same relation to itself as an efficient cause has to its effect, I should certainly not conclude that there was a first cause. *On the contrary, I should go on to ask for the cause of the so-called 'first' cause, and thus I would never reach anything which was the first cause of everything else*. However, I do readily admit that there can

exist something which possesses such great and inexhaustible power that it never required the assistance of *anything else* in order to exist in the first place, and does not now require any assistance for its preservation, *so that it is, in a certain way, its own cause; and I understand God to be such a being.* (AT VII 108–9 | CSM II 78; italics added)

If I understand the first two sentences of this last passage correctly, Descartes asserts here that the *only* alternative to self-causation is an infinite regression of causes. The possibility that God, qua first cause, simply has no cause is *not* considered a viable option in this passage, apparently, because it would constitute a blatant violation of the *ex nihilo nihil fit* principle which Descartes clearly endorsed (see, for example, AT VI 34 | CSM 128 and AT VII 135 | CSM II 297). True, even in this passage we sense a certain hesitation on Descartes' side as he qualifies the claim that God is its own (efficient) cause by the modifier: "in a certain way [*quodammodo*]." Still, we should take notice that in this passage God is not described as having no cause, but rather it is God's inexhaustible *power* – a causal faculty – which explains why God needs no *other* assistance, or cause, for its existence.

This state of things seems to change slightly in the axiomatic excerpt which appears at the very end of the Second Set of Replies. Here, Descartes posits the following axiom:

Concerning every existing thing it is possible to ask what is the cause of its existence. This question may even be asked concerning God, not because he needs any cause in order to exist, but because the immensity of his nature is the cause or reason [*ipsa ejus naturae immensitas est causa sive ratio*] why he needs no cause in order to exist. (AT VII 165 | CSM II 116)

There are three tiny but still noteworthy differences between the last two excerpts. (1) The First Replies excerpt suggests that God's inexhaustible *power* explains why he does not need the assistance of (another) cause. In the Second Replies excerpt, it is God's immense *nature* which provides the explanation. In his correspondence, Descartes suggests that God's power and essence are not distinct (AT V 342 | CSM III 372). Thus, this first difference seems a mere nuance. (2) In the First Replies excerpt, God is said to need no "assistance," i.e. an *external* cause, in order to exist. In the Second Replies, God is said to need "no cause," with no further qualification that the cause in question is an external cause. (3) In the First Replies excerpt, God's power seems to be the *cause* that makes the assistance of another cause redundant. In the Second Replies, God's nature is the "*cause or reason*" why he needs no cause. In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes seems to be trying to somewhat play down the claim that God is its own cause – or, to use his own admission in a closely related context, he has "deliberately altered [the formulation] so that I might suit a wide variety of minds" (AT VII 120 | CSM II 85). But was Descartes also truly withdrawing from the claim that God is its own efficient cause?

Descartes' surprising response to Catusus drew the attention of Antoine Arnauld, the author of the Fourth Set of Objections, and, at the time, a doctoral student of theology at the Sorbonne. For Arnauld, any positive interpretation of the claim that God derives its existence *a se* is simply absurd. It makes no sense to claim that God preserves itself, claims Arnauld, just as it makes no sense to claim that God creates itself (AT VII 212 | CSM II 149). Things which require creation and preservation by an efficient cause are things whose existence is not guaranteed by their very essence (AT VII 213 | CSM II 150). Responding to Descartes' claim in the First Replies that if we deny the possibility of divine

self-causation, we have no other resort but to accept an infinite regression of causes, Arnauld writes:

Not at all. If I thought we ought to look for the efficient cause, or quasi-efficient cause, of any given thing, then *what I would be looking for would be a cause distinct from the thing in question*, since it is completely evident to me that nothing can possibly stand in the same relation to itself as that in which an efficient cause stands to its effect. (AT VII 213–4 | CSM II 150; italics added)

At first glance, Arnauld's response to Descartes seems quite odd, as he appears not to address at all the threat – pointed out by Descartes – of an infinite regression of causes. But upon closer reading, it becomes evident that Arnauld is providing an interesting rebuttal. Were I to believe unrestrictedly that everything must have an efficient cause and thus follow an endless regression of causes in an attempt to explain why something, or the world, exists – claims Arnauld – I would *thereby* show that I am not satisfied with an answer suggesting that the world is self-caused (for if I *were* satisfied with such an answer, I would not inquire about the world's cause and the infinite causal regression would never get off the ground). But why would I not be satisfied with the suggested that the world is self-caused? Because “it is completely evident to me that nothing can possibly stand in the same relation to itself as that which an efficient cause stands to its effects.” In other words, what Arnauld seems to be saying is that our standard practice of looking for *external* efficient causes indicates that we rule out the possibility of self-causation and consider it a clear absurdity.

Descartes addresses Arnauld's objection in great detail in the Fourth Set of Replies. Yet, as Tad Schmatz has recently argued, “Descartes was not entirely on top of his game” in drafting his response (Schmatz 2011, p. 113; for a different evaluation, see Marion 1991, pp. 427–244). Descartes begins by asserting that his claim in the First Replies that “‘God is in a sense his own cause’ cannot possibly be taken to mean an efficient cause” (AT VII 236 | CSM II 65). Against Arnauld, Descartes argues that if we deny the universality of the requirement to inquire about the efficient causes of all things, we would block “the primary and principal way, if not the only way, that we have of proving the existence of God” (AT VII 238 | CSM III 166). Thus, maintaining, like Arnauld, that God has “no cause at all” is not an option for Descartes (AT VII 239 | CSM II 167). Instead, Descartes suggests the following observation:

Those who follow the sole guidance of the natural light will in this context spontaneously form a concept of cause that is common to both an efficient and a formal cause: that is to say, what derives its existence ‘from another’ will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as an efficient cause, *while what derives its existence ‘from itself’ will be taken to derive its existence from itself as a formal cause – that is, because it has the kind of essence which entails that it does not require an efficient cause.* (AT VII 238 | CSM II 166; italics added).

For Descartes, the proper cause of *essences* is formal, not efficient (AT VII 243 | CSM II 169). As we shall shortly see, on this issue, Spinoza will develop a very different view. Descartes also stresses that describing God as an (efficient) ‘effect of itself’ is an indignity to God, insofar as the effect of an efficient cause is commonly regarded as inferior to the cause (AT VII 242 | CSM II 169). Here too Spinoza will demur. Yet, despite all these pressures against the view of God as an efficient *causa sui*, even in the Fourth Replies Descartes would not completely withdraw from this view, and instead insist

that since in God's case, essence and existence are not distinct, God's essence qua "formal cause will be strongly analogous to an efficient cause, and hence can be called something close to an efficient" (AT VII 243 | CSM II 170). It is not completely clear to me why Descartes insists on defending a scaled-down, analogical version, of his claim that God is an efficient cause of itself, especially given the fact that for the Scholastics this view was almost an anathema (Aquinas 1975, *Summa contra gentiles*, I 13 iv; Aquinas 1964, *Summa Theologiae*, I 2 iii; Anselm 1998, *Monologion*, Ch. 6, p. 18); cf. Carraud, 2002, p. 267 and Lee, 2006, pp. 93–109). Perhaps it was the threat posed to the possibility of proving God's existence, once the universality of the demand for explanation through efficient causes is revoked, that made Descartes dig in his heels and insist that there is still a sense – analogical and non-literal as it is – in which even God has an efficient cause, or – if we adhere to Descartes' formulation – God is its own efficient cause.

2. Spinoza's *Causa (efficientis) sui*

The young Spinoza must have watched Descartes' struggle with the notion of *causa sui* with great interest. We know for a fact that Spinoza read the Objection and Replies quite carefully, as he frequently cites them in his own works (see, for example, DPP 1p5s, and KV I, vii | I/I/47/10; cf. Kambouchner 2021). We have already seen that in his early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§97), and the *Cogitata Metaphysica* (I/237/20), Spinoza was not yet ready to introduce the notion of *causa sui*. Instead, he would refer to God as an *uncreated* thing, or *uncreated* substance. One passage in the TIE comes close to endorsing the notion of *causa sui*: "that Thought is also called true which involves objectively the essence of some principle that *does not have a cause, and is known through itself and in itself [per se, & in se cognoscitur]*" (TIE §70; italics added). Here, the said principle has no cause, yet it is *known through itself*. The *Cogitata Metaphysica* – an early text of Spinoza that may or may not represent his own views at the time – also rejects the notion of divine, continuous self-creation (CM II 1 | I/250/25).

In the *Short Treatise*, the notion of *causa sui* already appears explicitly in the text, though in a relatively marginal note. In this context, Spinoza does not miss the opportunity to scold Aquinas for holding that God has no cause.

But God, the first cause of all things, *and also the cause of himself [de oorzaak syns zelfs]*, makes himself known through himself. So what Thomas Aquinas says – that God could not be proved a priori, because he supposedly has no cause – is not of much importance. (KV I 1 | I/18/25; italics added)

A further development occurs in a text commonly referred to as the first appendix to the *Short Treatise*, though if my argument elsewhere (Melamed 2019) is correct, this excerpt is in fact the earliest draft of the *Ethics* we currently have. In this text, *causa sui* appears as a key concept in the sixth axiom of this excerpt: "What is a cause of itself [*een oorzaak van zig zelfs*] could not possibly have limited itself" (I/114/19).

The *Ethics* opens with the definition of *causa sui* (E1d1) in a manner that seems almost nonchalant. What kind of causation is the causation of *causa sui* (in the *Ethics*)? In a recent important work, Vincent Carraud argued that Spinoza's *causa sui* should be

read along Cartesian lines, and that it is “much closer to the formal cause than the Cartesian efficient cause” (Carraud 2002, p. 324). Moreover, Carraud argues that, since for Spinoza God’s self-activity is the paradigm of all causation (Carraud 2002, p. 313), Spinoza’s causes, in general, should be read as formal rather than efficient causes. With regard to both claims I beg to differ. We do not have the space here to discuss the general nature of causation in the *Ethics*, but let me make three brief observations. (1) The term ‘*causa formalis*’ is virtually absent in the *Ethics*: it appears only once (E5p31), apparently as an analogy (“*tanquam à formali causâ*”), and not in a very central place. (2) Throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses ‘*causa*’ as interchangeable with ‘producing [*producere*]’. The terminology of production is tightly associated with *efficient* causation in both medieval and early modern philosophy (see Schmid 2015). (3) The terms ‘*causa efficiens*,’ ‘*causa immanens*,’ and ‘*causa transiens*’ are very common in the *Ethics*. Spinoza introduces the latter two terms in E1p18, and the reliance of E1p18d on E1p16c1, makes clear that the dichotomy between immanent and transient causation is a bifurcation between two sub-species of the efficient cause: an immanent cause is an efficient cause whose effect inheres in the cause, while a transient cause is a cause whose effect does not inhere in the cause (see Melamed 2013, pp. 61–66, for detailed discussion). In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza presents explicitly the distinction between immanent and transient causation as a distinction *within* the efficient cause (KV I 7 | I/35/20). For all these reasons, I think the case for reading Spinoza’s concept of cause, in general, as formal, rather than efficient, is not strong. Still, I believe Carraud put his finger on an important issue in Spinoza’s understanding of causation, namely, that Spinoza extends significantly the traditional functions of the efficient cause and assigns to the efficient cause functions which his predecessors would ascribe to the other Aristotelian causes.

Surprising as it may seem to some, I also believe that Spinoza is committed to the view that God is the *efficient cause of itself*, i.e. that the causation of the *causa sui* is efficient. In this sense, one can observe some continuity between Spinoza’s and Descartes’ discussions of *causa sui*, though, unlike Descartes, Spinoza is much more resolute and unapologetic in employing this crucial notion. Here is, very briefly, the main textual evidence supporting this conclusion.

(1) In E1p6c, Spinoza proves that “a substance cannot be produced by anything else [*substantiam ab alio produci non posse*]” The terminology of ‘*producere*’ is a clear indication that the causation at stake in E1p6c is efficient. In E1p7, Spinoza relies on E1p6c and on a tacit premise that everything must have a cause in order to infer that a substance must be a cause of itself, and thus (per E1d1) have essence involving existence. Now, suppose the tacit premise were not restricted to efficient causation, i.e. that it only required that everything must have a cause, either efficient or not. In such a case, the argument of E1p7d would be invalid: not being efficiently caused by anything else, a substance could still have a cause without being *causa sui*, by being non-efficiently caused by another. Thus, in order to be valid, the tacit premise must strictly require that everything must have an *efficient* cause. But this strict version of the tacit premise yields the conclusion that substance is an efficient cause of itself.

(2) E1p16 is probably the most central juncture of the *Ethics*. The proposition reads,

From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e. everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).

Relying on this proposition Spinoza infers the following corollary:

From this it follows that God is the *efficient cause* of all things [*omnium rerum*] which can fall under an infinite intellect. (E1p16c1; italics added)

For Spinoza, God itself is a thing [*res*] (see, for example, E2p1), and this infinite thing is known by God's intellect (per E2p3d and E2p4). Thus, from E1p16c1, we can immediately infer that God is also the efficient cause of itself (insofar as God actually "falls under an infinite intellect").

(3) In Ep. 60 (dated January 1675), Spinoza explains why he does not employ in the *Ethics* the common definition of God as *ens perfectissimum*. A proper definition of a thing, claims Spinoza, should "express the *efficient cause*" of the thing (IV/270/23; italics added; cf. TIE §96). However, Spinoza notes, "when I define God as a supremely perfect being [*ens summè perfectum*] . . . that definition does not express the efficient cause (for I understand the efficient cause to be both internal and external)." Unlike those who consider all efficient causes as external, Spinoza stresses that an efficient cause might well be *internal* (or immanent) (see E1p18d, KV II 2 | I/35/12–20, and KV II 26 | I/110/23). Spinoza is clearly well aware of the fact that many (though not all) of his predecessors would reject the possibility of an internal efficient cause (see KV I 2 | I/30/22–25). By allowing efficient causes to be also internal, Spinoza opens the path for the possibility that even God – outside of which there is nothing (E1p15) – has an efficient cause. Indeed, in the last quote from Ep. 60, Spinoza insists that even in the case of God, the proper definition (of God) *must* refer to the efficient cause (of the thing defined), from which one can clearly infer that God *has* an efficient cause (though, an *internal* efficient cause). Now, the efficient cause of God, cannot be anything other than God itself, for if the efficient cause were anything but God, God would have to be conceived through that cause (per E1a4), and thus God would be conceptually posterior to its cause which would contradict the definition of God as substance (E1d6).

(4) In Ep. 34 (dated January 1666), Spinoza presents his standard and fundamental distinction between the ground of the existence of God, or the substance, and the grounds for the existence of things which can be "many in number." God exists solely by virtue of its essence while all things which can be many in number exist by virtue of causes that are distinct from the things themselves. In this context, Spinoza tellingly characterizes existence-by-virtue-of-mere-essence as "being *produced* by the force of its own nature [*suae naturae vi produci*]" (IV/180/21; italics added). As we mentioned before, the terminology of production is a clear mark of efficient causation. Spinoza's employment of the terminology of production to describe existing by virtue of one's own essence alone seems to indicate that, for Spinoza, existence by virtue of essence is a case of efficient causation.

(5) In E1p25 Spinoza proves that God is also the efficient cause of the *essence* of things (recall that for Descartes (AT VII 243 | CSM II 169), causation of essence belongs to formal causation). This intriguing proposition and its demonstration read:

E1p25: *God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things [rerum], but also of their essence.*

Dem.: If you deny this, then God is not the cause of the essence of things; and so (by A4) the essence of things can be conceived without God. But (by P15) this is absurd. Therefore, God is also the cause of the essence of things, q.e.d.

Now, let us ask: what is the scope of ‘*rerum*’ in E1p25? Is God the efficient cause of his own essence? If we follow the argument of E1p25d, *God must be the efficient cause of his own essence*. For otherwise, God’s essence could be conceived without God which would flatly contradict E1p15.

The five texts we have discussed so far establish, I believe, that Spinoza was happy to affirm that God is the efficient cause of itself. Still, how would he respond to the powerful arguments against the intelligibility of this notion?

3. Defending *Causa (efficientis) sui*

Let us begin by considering two arguments which appear explicitly in the exchanges between Descartes, Caterus, and Arnauld. Then we will consider two additional arguments against the intelligibility of efficient self-causation.

(1) *Must efficient causation be spread out in time?* – Just like Descartes, Spinoza allows for efficient causation which is unmistakably *not* spread in time. Of such a kind is the causation of essences (E1p25), the causation of infinite modes (E1pp21–23; cf. Melamed 2013, pp. 122–126), the flow of *natura naturata* from *natura naturans* (see E1p29s: *natura naturata* is caused by, but is not after, *natura naturans*), as well as the flow of duration from eternity (Ep. 12. IV/57/17). In short, immanent causation is not spread in time (Melamed 2013, p. 111). If an efficient cause need not be temporally prior to its effect, then one major obstacle to the possibility of self-causation (and reciprocal causation) is removed.

(2) *Is it proper for God to be an effect of itself?* – In his response to Arnauld, Descartes admits that he hesitates to call God ‘cause of itself’ in order “not to imply that he has any of the indignity of being an effect” (AT VII 242 | CSM II 168–169). Spinoza, however, should not be moved much by such considerations as he openly speaks of “God insofar as it is modified by a modification which is finite” (E1p28d), and thus, as a recipient of an action. Moreover, in E1p15s, Spinoza notes that even if extension were divisible, he would still assert that extension is one of God’s attributes since there is nothing “unworthy [*indignam esse*]” in God being acted on *by itself* (II/60/13–15).

(3) *Is it Contradictory to be both the Cause and Effect of Itself?* – In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas – echoing Aristotle – presents the following argument against the view of God as causing, or moving, itself: “The same thing cannot be at once in act and in potency with respect to the same thing. But everything that is moved is, as such, in potency, . . . [while] that which moves is, as such, in act” (Aquinas 1975, p. 88; *Summa contra gentiles*, I 13 iv. Descartes might be alluding to this argument in AT VII 240 | CSM II 168). For the Aristotelians, causation is a movement from potentiality to actuality. From this perspective, *causa sui* seems to be a state in which a thing is and is not actual, at the same time, and in the same respect (Lee 2006, p. 98). This argument too seems to be ineffective against Spinoza’s notion of *causa sui* for two reasons. First, as we have seen before, Spinoza would deny that efficient causation requires time. But since movement and change presuppose time, efficient causation need not involve either change or movement. Second, Spinoza dispenses with the Aristotelian notion of potentiality (see E1p17s | II/62/19–20), and thereby also rejects the Aristotelian view of causation as movement from potentiality to actuality.

(4) *Can God be less Perfect than Itself?* – In the course of his discussion of teleology in E1app, Spinoza presents the following claim regarding the infinite modes (discussed in E1pp21–23): “that effect is most perfect which is produced immediately by God, and the more something requires intermediate causes to produce it, the more imperfect it is” (E1app | II/80/16–18). In other words, infinite modes which inhere *immediately* in God are more perfect (whatever perfection here means) than infinite modes which inhere in God through the mediation of other infinite modes (see E1p22; cf. Melamed 2013, pp. 12–1). Now, this might give one the impression that Spinoza is committed to the view that an effect of an immanent cause *must be* less real than its cause. But if God is the immanent efficient cause of itself, we would have to conclude that God is less real than itself, which is absurd.

The fallacy in the last argument lies in the assumption that an effect of an immanent cause is *always* less real than its cause. For Spinoza, a mode is less perfect, or less real, than its substance precisely because it is in-another, and depends on another for its being. Substance which is only in-itself and is immanently caused only by itself is maximally real since it is maximally independent. In other words, it is only inherence *in another* (but not inherence in itself) that creates the gap of perfection or reality. This point is confirmed by the very sentence by which we began the current discussion: “and the more something requires intermediate causes to produce it, the more imperfect it is.” In the limit case, where there are no intermediaries and the effect is not at all distinct from the cause, there is no difference in perfection.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied Spinoza’s extraordinary notion of *causa sui* and the Cartesian background of this discussion. I have argued that, unlike Descartes, Spinoza was unapologetic in his willingness to defend the notion of God being the efficient cause of itself. The introduction of *causa immanens* and the view of the causation of essences as belonging to efficient causation created the conceptual space required for sustaining the notion of *causa efficiens sui*. We have also discussed four powerful objections to the intelligibility of *causa sui* – three by Spinoza’s predecessors and one internal to his system. For all I can tell, none of these objections is conclusive and most do not create a major dent in Spinoza’s defense.

This of course does not mean that the notion of *causa sui* is immune from problems or even free from inconsistency. Rigid proofs of consistency of philosophical concepts are extremely difficult (and extremely rare in philosophy) and I have not even tried the first steps on this path. One may perhaps suggest that reflexive efficient causation is just *intuitively* wrong. But the weight of such an argument would depend much on one’s valuation of intuitions. On my side, I can only note that for the medieval and early modern philosophers it was absolutely intuitively clear that parthood is an irreflexive relation (“the whole is great than its part” has been used as stock example of an eternal truth). Alas, contemporary mereology allows for reflexive parthood. Thus, my intuition about the reflexivity, or irreflexivity, of a specific relation, may indicate nothing over and above uncritical habit of thinking.

There may well be strong and cogent arguments against efficient self-causation, but it is now time for them to be stated explicitly and scrutinized. To use the words of Yonah Wallach (1944–1985), an exceptional Israeli woman poet:

We are told that there is *another* kind of sex
 It's good that someone knows about it
 If there is another kind of sex – bring it out unto us
 And let us know it.

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