

## A Few Words about Spinoza, a Philosopher of Few or, Perhaps, No Words

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I've been invited, in a forward-looking way, to say what are some of the most exciting new directions for research in Spinoza. Before you get your hopes up (or down), I want to inform you at the outset that I'm not going to answer that question. Part of the reason I'm not going to answer is that I want to take a moment to highlight and appreciate the vibrant state of Spinoza scholarship now and over the last 20 years or so. As many of you know, research on Spinoza now includes not only Spinoza's metaphysics and epistemology—which had often been the focus of work on Spinoza—but also any number of aspects of his ethical philosophy, his political and social philosophy, his philosophy of psychology, his philosophy of religion, etc. We have also of late been treated to amazing works situating Spinoza in his immediate historical philosophical context, and also works that chart both the short- and long-term influences on Spinoza and the short- and long-term history of those influenced by Spinoza up to the present-day. We are privileged to live in what is genuinely a golden age of Spinoza studies, and the emergence of this journal is the latest manifestation of the specialness of this period. Another sign of the golden age is the increasing collaboration of philosophers and philosophical historians working on Spinoza from different traditions and in different languages.

What especially makes this an exceptional period in Spinoza studies for me are all the unprecedented insights that I gain from my students and in some cases—although this makes me feel impossibly old and at the same time paradoxically young—the students of my students. Even more important, perhaps, are the entirely new areas within Spinoza studies that my students introduce me to. All I can say is thank you, and this welcome state only confirms that I can look to the Spinozistic future with confidence even as—again—I don't say here anything about it.

In light of all this wonderfulness in Spinoza-land, I am hard-pressed to identify a particular area as the—or one of the—most promising avenues of future research. In particular, I am *not* going to say that a currently vibrant *rationalist* program for interpreting Spinoza—a program which sees Spinoza as guided by the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR), the principle according to which

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each thing or fact has an explanation—is far from exhausted. Of course, I don't have to say—and I won't be saying—that the PSR in the hands of a Spinoza is not the same as the PSR in the hands of a Leibniz or a Wolff or a Kant or a Nāgārjuna or a Plato or whoever. And I won't be reminding you that the topic of exactly what the PSR amounts to in Spinoza is one on which we've made much progress and on which there is much more progress to be made.<sup>1</sup>

I also won't be saying that the drastic and disturbing implications of Spinoza's rationalist treatment of normativity and his rationalist rejection of the normative/non-normative distinction and of the practical/theoretical distinction have not yet been understood or appreciated and that a big apocalyptic and invigorating surprise is waiting for us all once we realize the, as it were, enormity of giving up the normative/non-normative distinction. The subversive implications—grounded in Spinoza's rationalism—of *Ethics* 2p49, of the one-and-the-sameness of will and intellect, have yet to be discerned clearly. But that day (evil or good or beyond evil and good) is coming. When it does come, nothing will ever be the same: not our understanding of Spinoza, and especially not the whole edifice of Kantian and most non-Kantian moral philosophies erected as they are on the basis of an only superficially plausible theoretical-practical distinction. This is a distinction that so many philosophers think they cannot live without and that Spinoza has shown both that they must live without and, indeed, that they already live without even though they may not have realized this yet. The upshot of the identity of will and intellect in Spinoza will be—if I can only bring myself to say it—one of the most fertile regions of future Spinoza research.

This rationalist program for understanding Spinoza can also lead us to welcome a long-overdue re-assessment of the idealist interpretations of Spinoza from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, interpretations that more or less vanished from the scene with the rise of analytical philosophy. Although I won't, of course, be saying anything like this here, it might be noted that the PSR-reading of Spinoza lends itself to a form of idealism. This is, in part, because the biconditional that links existence and intelligibility and that is expressive of the PSR—if  $x$  exists (or obtains), then  $x$  is intelligible—at least points to a dependence of being on thought. This priority of thought over being in general (and over extension or the physical) is one hallmark of idealism. Something like this idealism is, it seems, built into the definitional structure of Spinoza's *Ethics*, for substance and mode are each *defined* in terms of conception and thus the *essence* of substance and of mode alike consist in part in being conceived. And, of course, attribute is also defined in terms of the intellect. All of these definitions suggest some form of idealism. So, although I'm not saying this, bring back Joachim and more recent figures like T. L. S. Sprigge who, we can now admit, were onto something all along.<sup>2</sup>

But perhaps what we should go for isn't exactly idealism. After all, the same rationalist line of thought that involves the equivalence of existence and intelligibility may lead to the view that, given Spinoza's concept of number as involving *arbitrary* distinctions, any multiplicity, any distinctions, any numerosity—even being one in a numerical sense—is unintelligible. This thought appears famously and cryptically in Spinoza's letter to Jelles in 2 June of 1674 (Ep 50/G IV

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1 See, e.g., Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Mogens Laerke, “Les Études Spinozistes aux États-Unis: Spinoza et le Principe de Raison Suffisante (‘PSR’ en Anglais), Représentations, Concepts, Idées,” *Archives de Philosophie* 77, (2014): 721–727; Martin Lin, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 133–154.

2 See e.g. Timothy L. S. Sprigge, “Spinoza's Identity Theory”, *Inquiry* 20, no. 1–4, (1977): 419–445.

239b–241b), in which Spinoza says that God is only improperly called one (see also CM I 6/G I 245–249). When unpacked fully, this claim of impropriety can be seen to have implications for not only the alleged oneness of God, but also for the alleged multiplicity of attributes and the alleged multiplicity of modes. All such numerosity, all such distinctions are improper, for Spinoza, or so it can be argued on rationalist grounds.

So we arrive at the view—sometimes associated with the British idealists—that the alleged distinction among the attributes is illusory. There is no multiplicity of attributes. In this light, we can also re-think—after a mere two paragraphs!—whether the label “idealism” is appropriate after all. If idealism presupposes an asymmetry—and thus a distinction—between thought and extension or physicality, then Spinoza is not an idealist after all, simply because there is no genuine multiplicity and hence no genuine asymmetry of attributes. But none of this is something I’m speaking about.

I also won’t be saying that the PSR-reading of Spinoza thus leads to a kind of skeptical reading. Spinoza is known to have little patience with a radical skepticism of the kind that Descartes adumbrates in the First Meditation: just consider the bluntness of §§47 and 48 of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (G II 18, lines 8–25). The form of skepticism that Spinoza rejects challenges not the coherence of our ordinary beliefs, but only the justification for those beliefs. Such a skepticism has been called (by Robert Fogelin and others) epistemological skepticism.<sup>3</sup> And Spinoza’s impatience here is grounded in his rationalism: the Cartesian skeptic’s downfall is that he countenances a sharp gap or bifurcation between the world and our beliefs about it, a gap that is unintelligible from a rationalist perspective. This anti-skeptical strand in Spinoza has received considerable attention over the years.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however—and this has been more or less overlooked—this same rationalism leads to a deep *conceptual* skepticism in Spinoza, a skepticism that challenges the very coherence of our ordinary concepts and thus of claims containing those concepts. (My appreciation of the significance of the distinction between epistemological and conceptual versions of skepticism has been greatly enhanced through many conversations with Bridger Ehli.) Exactly what are the implications of Spinoza’s conceptual skepticism and exactly how—if at all—it is compatible with his emphatic rejection of epistemological skepticism are I would say—that is, if I were saying anything—topics very much worthy of further pursuit.

Indeed, the pressure in and on Spinoza leading toward a deep conceptual skepticism renders questionable the possibility of even articulating in concepts or in words any kind of Spinozistic position on skepticism, idealism, normativity, and relations. It is, perhaps, most of all for this reason that I won’t be responding to the question of what will be the most exciting areas of Spinozistic research. It may be that about such matters there is, in the end, literally nothing to be said or even thought, as far as conceptual thought goes.

For this reason, I suspect that among such areas of future development—areas that I’m not talking about in discursive terms—a renewed focus on the third kind of knowledge in Spinoza will figure prominently. There has been much excellent work in recent years on the third kind of

3 See, e.g., Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), chapter 1.

4 See, e.g., Dominik Perler, “Spinoza on Skepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 220–239.

knowledge<sup>5</sup> and, if I were to say anything, I would point to this topic—*scientia intuitiva*—as the most important area of all, a topic about which, fittingly perhaps, Spinoza says so little. My students have helped me to explore the implications of this vision of Spinoza and, among my most recent students, I would happily highlight in this regard Stephen Harrop and Josefine Klingspor. They have, on more than one occasion, saved me from the excesses of my rationalist reading and have also, all the while, developed their own innovative and unique paths through this most challenging terrain.

These rationalist ruminations point me in a direction that so few are pursuing nowadays or in past days: the connections, parallels, convergences, and disparities between Spinoza and certain non-Western thinkers, such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, Nāgārjuna, and Śrīharṣa, who while working in different traditions from Spinoza, all arguably explore the same rich philosophical vein that, I have claimed, Spinoza taps into so successfully. This view is the connection among the PSR, a distinctionless monism, and a powerful conceptual skepticism. Here I'm excited to mention Alex Douglas' important forthcoming work, *Against Identity (Escaping the Self in Zhuangzi, Spinoza, and René Girard)*, and here also I'm guided by students—in this case, especially by Angela Vettikkal—who know so much more about such connections than I do and who can open the eyes of all of us to this not-yet-fully-tapped richness in Spinoza's thought.

Finally, a methodological suggestion for future work that I won't be making. Strands are OK. Sometimes it seems as though interpreters (not just interpreters of Spinoza) are seeking, when they set about unpacking the thought of a given philosopher, what might be thought to be the holy grail of interpretation: an interpretation that can accommodate all of what a philosopher says on a given topic or at least an interpretation that is not in conflict with anything else the philosopher says. But this is such an unrealistic goal for an interpreter, especially for an interpreter of Spinoza who—paradoxically perhaps, given his overall monism—contains and considers and develops philosophical multitudes. Our job, I would suggest, is to bring Spinoza's texts to life in all their glorious philosophical and historical complexity. Sometimes—often, perhaps—this involves identifying a strand in Spinoza's thought and in his texts and developing and exploring that strand, letting it flourish so that we can appreciate it even if, in the end, it conflicts or is in tension with another strand in his thinking. It is good to bring forth what one sees as genuine lines of thought in Spinoza, even if those lines of thought are not at first or even ever seen to be compatible with other genuine paths in Spinoza's thought. There is no need to diminish one strand in deference to another allegedly more genuine strand. One of our responsibilities as interpreters may be to nurture all of Spinoza's children—all of the strands in his thought—and let them flower, at least for a brief, shining moment. It's not for us to say—and, by the way, it's not for Spinoza to say either—that *this* strand is what Spinoza most cares about and that *this* topic is what most interests Spinoza, and those other topics, whatever they may be, are at best ancillary, do not drive his project, and may even be dismissed. Our role is, perhaps, to be open to all of Spinoza's children and to let them grow and flourish as much as they can.

It is because of this spirit of openness that, I believe, work on Spinoza has come so far, and this spirit of openness will, I also believe, carry us through into the next uncharted, exciting, and unspeakable stage of Spinoza studies.

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5 See, e.g., Kristin Primus, "Scientia Intuitiva in the *Ethics*," in *A Critical Guide to Spinoza's Ethics*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 169–186.

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