Spinoza and Spinozism in Twenty-First Century Anglophone Philosophy

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Abstract
In this paper, I survey some prominent developments in Spinoza scholarship in English-speaking countries in the past quarter-century. Picking up where Tom Cook left off in his analysis of the reception of Spinoza in Anglo-American philosophy in the hundred years after the founding of the *Vereniging Het Spinozahuis* (1897–1997) (“Spinoza’s Place in Twentieth Century’s Anglo-American Philosophy”), I seek to identify some of the main currents in the rich profusion of twenty-first century Spinoza scholarship in the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia. Scholarship on Spinoza’s metaphysics has continued to blossom, harkening back in some respects to the idealist interpretations with which Cook opens his survey. But whereas there was a notable lack of scholarly works on Spinoza’s moral and political philosophy in the twentieth century, there is now an abundance of scholarship in these fields. I will conclude by examining the reach of Spinozism in the twenty-first century, looking at the ways in which scholars and journalists have presented Spinoza’s philosophy to a non-academic readership, and exploring the ways in which contemporary metaphysicians and philosophers of emotion and cognition have cast their work under the “brand” of Spinozism.

Keywords: Spinoza; idealism; materialism; ethics; politics

Spinoza’s Metaphysics and the Idealism-Materialism Pendulum

1.1 Turn of the Twentieth Century Idealism

In 1997, Thomas Cook delivered a paper to the *Spinoza House Society* [*Vereniging het Spinozahuis*] documenting the first hundred years of English-language Spinoza scholarship since the founding of
the society in 1897. I have the more modest task of telling the story of roughly the past quarter-century. However, since the preceding hundred years of scholarship provides an important prologue for the period I will focus on, I must open by reviewing some of the earlier scholarship.

Before I begin, though, here are the ground rules that I have adopted. Since my charge is to discuss scholarship from English-speaking countries, and not English-language scholarship—much of which is written by people working in non-Anglophone countries—I will only discuss scholars who, irrespective of their place of birth, have largely built their careers in Anglophone countries. And when I talk of Anglophone scholarship and philosophy below, I intend this, somewhat infelicitously, to refer only to the writings of those who have worked for the most part in English-language countries. Even within these parameters, my account will, perforce, only cover a narrow slice of the immense and growing scholarly literature. With these preliminaries out of the way, let me begin.

Cook’s narrative starts in the 1880s, just before the founding of the *Spinoza House Society*, with the flowering of idealism and idealist readings of Spinoza. There were two main theses of the idealist reading. The first concerns the priority of Thought among the attributes, and the basis for the priority reading lies in Spinoza’s very definition of attribute (E1D4) as “[what the intellect perceives of a substance, as *tanquam*] constituting its essence.” If attributes depend on what the intellect perceives, it would seem that, as Frederick Pollock maintains, “Thought swallows up all the other Attributes; for all conceivable Attributes turn out to be objective aspects of Thought itself.” Similarly, James Martineau asserts that this leaves only the “Thinking principle,” since the “material world” is reduced to “a mode or phenomenon of thought.”

The second idealist thesis concerns the ontological status of finite modes. The idealist suspicion, expressed already in Hegel’s critique of Spinoza, is that even if Spinoza himself thought that “infinitely many things in infinitely many modes” follow from “divine nature” (E1p16), his system cannot explain a diversity of finite things arise out of the one substance. Among turn-of-the-twentieth-century interpreters, this point was most fully developed by Oxford professor and disciple of renowned British Idealist F. H. Bradley, Harold H. Joachim, in his *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza* (Clarendon, 1901). On Joachim’s reading, since finite modes do not follow from God’s absolute nature (E1p21) but only from infinitely many other finite modes (E1p28), it is unclear how, for Spinoza, *any* finite

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2 E1d4f; cf. Ep. 9 (G IV 46).
4 James Martineau, *A Study of Spinoza* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 188. Spinoza’s argument for the claim that God is an “extended thing” turns on the fact that all singular bodies involve the concept of extension (E2p2d), and concepts are, according to the idealists, mental entities. Moreover, substances and modes—the two kinds of things Spinoza acknowledges—are defined in part by how they are “conceived” (E1def3 and 5). From here, it tempting to conclude that *all* ontological variety in Spinoza’s metaphysics is merely ideal: constituted by and within thought. For more on this worry, see Samuel Newlands, “Thinking, Conceiving, and Idealism in Spinoza,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 94, no. 1 (2012): 31-52. See also Karolina Hübner and Stephen Zylstra, “Idealist Readings of Spinoza,” in *The Cambridge Spinoza Lexicon*, Karolina Hübner and Justin Steinberg eds. (Cambridge, forthcoming).
mode could arise—he refers to this as the “whole problem of the Ethics.” The problem of the existence of finite modes is compounded by the fact that finite modes are determinate expressions of God’s attributes (E1p25c), and, since all determination involves negation (Ep. 50; E1p8s), finitude would seem to involve privation. Since God is fully real, lacking nothing, Joachim concludes that the “[finite] world of isolated and perishable things [...] is largely illusory.”

1.2 Post-War Materialism

The prevalence of the idealist reading is attested to by Russian Marxist Abram Deborin’s denunciation of the 1927 celebration of the 250th anniversary of Spinoza’s death arranged by the Societas Spinozana in the Hague. Deborin reports that, at this event, “everyone agreed that Spinoza was a great idealist, pantheist, and mystic, the founder of a new religion,” leading him to retort: “You are impudent liars!” Spinoza, on Deborin’s account, was “essentially a great atheist and materialist.”

I mention this episode, which strays beyond Anglophone philosophy, for two reasons. First, because it captures the prevalence of idealist readings during period. And second, because a parallel “materialist” rebuttal would emerge in the very different intellectual climate of Postwar Anglo-American philosophy, with two of the scholars who are most responsible for reviving Anglo-American interest in Spinoza, Stuart Hampshire and Edwin Curley, leading the way.

In 1969, Hampshire delivered the Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association on Spinoza, entitled: “A Kind of Materialism,” in which he claims that Spinoza grasped better than anyone:

what it would be like actually to be a materialist, in the serious sense: not simply of affirming an abstract thesis in the classroom, but of actually living and acting with some of the specific knowledge that a materialist claims must be obtainable.

And Curley, in Behind the Geometrical Method claims that:

Spinoza is best regarded as a kind of materialist, more metaphysically sophisticated Hobbes, anxious to incorporate into his philosophy Cartesian insights which Hobbes could not appreciate, but a materialist nonetheless.

Curley proceeds to claim that despite the apparent parity and irreducibility of the attributes, Spinoza in fact shows that the mind depends on the body, leading Curley to conclude: “I do not see how we can characterize it as anything but a materialistic program.”  

By the second half of the twentieth century, the pendulum had swung away from the idealist reading and towards a more materialist-friendly reading, perhaps reflecting the more general prevalence of materialism in postwar Anglophone philosophy.

1.3 The Idealist Revival: Nothing is Real, and Nothing to Get Hung About

This brings us finally to the period on which I am reporting, and in which idealist readings have achieved something of a comeback in Anglophone Spinoza scholarship, due in large part to the work of Michael Della Rocca.

Della Rocca arrives at his version of the idealism by way of a different route from the one taken by the turn-of-the-twentieth-century idealists. His lynchpin is Spinoza’s commitment the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), which, on Della Rocca’s interpretation, demands that all phenomena be intelligible, and indeed intelligible in terms of intelligibility itself. While Spinoza’s metaphysics seems to rely on several different dependency relations—including inherence or “being in,” causation, and conception (in/through oneself or another)—Della Rocca claims that conception is king, reducing these other relations to conception. Indeed, on his account, everything ultimately bottoms out in intelligibility (to conceive x through y is for y to make x intelligible), including existence itself. As he epigrammatically puts things, “For Spinoza, to be is to be intelligible.”

This ultra-rationalist reading lends itself to the idealist cause by embracing each of the main theses. (1) Priority of Thought. Since conceivability is king, everything depends on the attribute of Thought, through which we conceive of things. (2) (Partial) Unreality of Finite Things. Since to exist is to be intelligible, inadequate ideas, which qua inadequate cannot be made fully intelligible, do not fully exist. Moreover, since the minds of finite things are partially constituted by inadequate ideas (E3p9s), minds too are not fully real (E3p9s). Arguably, the same could be said of finite bodies, which are known only through affections of one’s own body (E2p21–26), which are themselves only inadequately grasped (E2p27). If the (temporal) existence of finite bodies can only be represented inadequately and so cannot be made fully intelligible, they too would seem to be partially unreal. Indeed, Della Rocca has more recently argued that nothing is entirely real—not the world, not even God—since a thing can only be made intelligible in relation to some other thing or property; but the things/properties and relations that we invoke to make other things intelligible cannot themselves be made fully intelligible, since this would require still further things/properties and relations, setting off a regress.

10 Curley, Geometrical Method, 78.
14 Della Rocca, Spinoza, 266.
Della Rocca’s interpretation—which, by his own admission pushes the PSR further than Spinoza himself was prepared to go—unsurprisingly has its share of critics, including two of his former students: Yitzhak Melamed and Samuel Newlands. Many of Melamed’s objections target the reduction of all relations to conception. He argues, for instance, that since the essence or definition of a thing is sometimes sufficient to distinguish concepts (like a square and a triangle), one might distinguish inheritance and conception relations by simply appealing to the essential (semantic) difference between being in something and being understood through something.  

Moreover, the reduction of inheritance and causation to conception would render otiose Spinoza’s distinction between transitive and immanent causation (E1p18), since transitive causation is precisely a form of causation in which the effect does not inhere in the cause. On Della Rocca’s account, all causation would have to be immanent, contrary to what Spinoza claims.  

The reduction of inheritance and causation to conception also leads to implausible results, since it implies for instance that something that now can inhere in something that no longer exists, and that modes could inhere in multiple substrates at the same time.  

Newlands has argued that even if we grant to Della Rocca that conception is king, we should not take this as implying that Thought is the only, or even the most basic, attribute, since, on Newlands’ analysis, “conception” or “conceiving” is attribute-neutral. To “conceive of modes” under the attribute of Extension is thus tantamount to saying that modes express extension, and not to bring modes of Extension, or Extension itself, under the attribute of Thought.

2 Analytic Spinoza

While Della Rocca’s account of Spinoza resembles in doctrine the account advanced by earlier idealists, his philosophical method more closely resembles that of their critics, the founders of what has come to be known as “analytic philosophy.” Analytic philosophy is harder to define than it is to identify. It refers, roughly speaking, to a method of philosophical reasoning that seeks to elucidate and evaluate philosophical positions by analyzing concepts, identifying ambiguities or inconsistencies, drawing distinctions, pursuing entailments, and generally seeking precision, clarity, and internal consistency. It is, without question, the dominant approach to Anglophone philosophy.

18 Melamed, Spinoza’s Metaphysics, 99–100, 103–104.
19 Newlands, “Thinking.”
20 Arguably, Spinoza’s geometrically demonstrated Ethics is particularly well suited for the analytic approach. Spinoza’s own hermeneutic principles, as articulated in chapter seven of the TTP, seem to license a direct philosophical engagement with the Ethics. There he claims that while exegetically complex texts, like Scripture, require an understanding of the history of the text, the intentions of the authors, the original languages used, and so forth, texts that are marked by “Euclidean clarity” do not require complex hermeneutical principles (7.67–8). We can engage with them directly, with only an “ordinary—almost childish!—knowledge” (TTP 7.67).
Analytic history of philosophy tends to be problem-driven, identifying apparent tensions or interpretative challenges and offering solutions to these problems or, in some cases, exposing the inadequacy of other solutions. To its critics, analytic philosophy’s preoccupation with “problems” is a shortcoming, contributing to narrow investigations, and Talmudic-level meta-commentaries. To its proponents, the narrowness of focus is one of its strengths, as it forces one to think rigorously and precisely about especially challenging texts.

2.1 Curley and Bennett

Two of the most important works of analytic scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century are Edwin Curley’s *Spinoza’s Metaphysics* and Jonathan Bennett’s *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*. Curley and Bennett’s many disagreements and ways of framing textual problems set the agenda for much of the interpretative work that has followed. Here are a few examples.

**Modes**

Curley famously claimed that it would be a category mistake to treat Spinozistic modes as properties or accidents of a substance since Spinoza’s modes are concrete particulars and logical subjects, not universals or predicables. Bennett, by contrast, thinks that Spinoza reduces finite things to ways in which God’s attributes are expressed, which is to say that modes belong squarely on the property side of thing-property divide. Bennett’s “field metaphysic” interpretation of extended substance includes an account of how particular logical subjects may be seen as property-like.

**Necessitarianism**

Curley and Bennett both think that there is pressure on Spinoza to allow for the contingency of finite modes, in part because finite modes do not follow from God’s absolute nature (E1p21) but rather can only be causally explained through an infinite series of finite causes, no member of which can be itself deduced from God’s absolute nature. Curley takes this to imply that there are other possible worlds, or other series of finite modes that are consistent with the laws of nature. Bennett issues a mixed verdict, concluding that Spinoza was torn between thinking that this is the only possible world and that there are other possible series of finite modes, concluding that “Spinoza did not think his situation through.”

**Teleology**

With respect to teleology, Bennett takes Spinoza to be an unrelenting and unrestricted critic, denying not only that Nature acts for the sake of ends, but also that humans do. Miss that, he writes, and one will “miss most of what is interesting in Part 3.” By contrast, Curley takes Spinoza’s critique to

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be restricted to *divine* teleology, allowing that humans can act for the sake of ends, even if these ends are nothing but appetites (E4Pref). 

**Eternity of the Mind**

Curley and Bennett agree on one thing: the final section of part five of the *Ethics* on the eternity of the mind is marred by obscurity. Curley concedes, “In spite of many years of study, I still do not feel that I understand this part of the *Ethics* at all adequately.” Bennett is simply dismissive, declaring it to be “an unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster” and “rubbish which causes others to write rubbish.”

### 2.2 Responses to Curley and Bennett

The problems raised by Curley and Bennett have shaped much of the Anglophone scholarship of the past several decades.

With respect to the ontological status of modes, John Carriero suggests that Spinozistic modes might be like Aristotelian particular accidents, or what would be called “tropes” today, which are *both* individuals and properties. Martin Lin offers a subtly different path between the alleged thing-property divide, maintaining that finite modes should be understood as accidental objects—that is, as particular things with properties and that stand in causal relations, but which arise because of the way some other entity is modified—e.g., like “waves” on the ocean.

With respect to the issues of necessitarianism, teleology, and the eternity of the mind, it is worth singling out Don Garrett’s pioneering scholarship. Garrett defends the strictness of Spinoza’s necessitarianism against the concerns raised by Curley and Bennett. On the issue of teleology, Garrett broadly sides with Curley, maintaining that, contrary to Bennett, Spinoza allows the end-directedness of human action. And in a characteristically ambitious and insightful paper, Garrett picks up the gauntlet thrown down by Curley and Bennett and defends the internal consistency and significance of Spinoza’s claims that there is a part of the mind that is eternal and that the more one understands, the greater this eternal part will be. Garrett’s corpus also includes: a dazzling defense of the argument for the *conatus* doctrine (E3p6d) that vindicates Spinoza against Bennett’s charge that the demonstration is riddled with equivocations; multiple articles on the foundations of Spinoza’s monism; several pieces on Spinoza’s

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26 Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method*, 84.
conception of truth; and a pair of articles on Spinoza’s naturalistic account of representation that responds to problems posed by Margaret Wilson and Daisie Radner, among others. These and other essays, along with several illuminating postscripts, have now been helpfully published as a single collection, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy*.\(^{33}\)

Recent years have seen the emergence of a new generation of Anglophone scholars of Spinoza’s metaphysics—including not only Melamed, Newlands, and Lin, but also Karolina Hübner, John Morrison, and Kristin Primus, to name a few—who have taken on some of the thorniest problems in Spinoza’s metaphysics. In short, interest in Spinoza’s metaphysics remains strong in Anglophone philosophy, with no signs of waning.

### 3 Experientia Non Vaga

In terms of epistemology, Spinoza’s conception of the imagination has been rehabilitated in various ways and in various corners of the Anglophone scholarship. While ideas of the imagination constitute, for Spinoza, the first (or lowest) form of cognition, and are the only source of confusion and inadequacy (E2p41), forceful cases have recently been made that the imagination can play a constructive epistemic role.\(^{34}\)

The constructive role of imagination is central to many feminist interpretations of Spinoza. Australian scholars Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, in their book *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, emphasize the embodied, imitative, and intersubjective character of Spinozistic cognition, maintaining that Spinoza does not seek to *overcome* ideas of the imaginations so much as to “replace the illusions which block [one’s] striving” with “new fictions which better serve” it.\(^{35}\)

The epistemic role of the imagination is also a central theme in the work of British Philosopher Susan James, who has articulated at least four ways in which the imagination contributes to knowledge: (1) by priming the mind to grasps things as they are; (2) by mimicking reason, resulting in a next-best way of knowing; (3) by applying the general dictates of reason to particular cases; and (4) by supporting or strengthening one’s commitment to adequate ideas.\(^{36}\)

Some North American scholars have also recently sought to defend the epistemic status of beings of reason, which are often treated as little more than confused and obscuring abstractions. Hübner has argued we can construct well-founded beings of reason, like the idea of species-essences, that, while not representing something that is itself formally real, is nevertheless grounded in (or derived from) actual similarities or agreements found in formally real things (Hübner, “Spinoza on Essences, Universals, and Beings of Reason”; “Spinoza on Universals”).\(^{37}\) And Michael Rosenthal

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has argued that, on the basis of analogical comparisons—guided in part by our desires—we can form abstract models of things, which, when carefully and thoughtfully constructed, “organize our fragmented experience into a more coherent whole that can improve our power of striving.”

Such accounts of the positive role of the imagination are not confined to epistemology. How could they be, when epistemological improvement itself constitutes a vital part of Spinoza’s ethical project, and when the imagination and imagination-based passions play such a crucial role in civic motivation and religious belief and practice? Unsurprisingly then, work on the positive role of imagination is part and parcel of a growing body of Anglophone scholarship on Spinoza’s moral, political, and religious thought, to which I will now turn.

4 Ethics, Politics, and Religion

Cook’s account notably, but understandably, lacks a substantial discussion of Anglophone work on Spinoza’s moral, political, or religious views. With respect to the political works, Cook observes that “until just recently there was relatively little discussion of the political theory among Anglo-American philosophers.” Fortunately, things have changed rather dramatically since then, as there is now a rich literature on nearly all aspects of his ethical, political, and religious thought.

In the past decade and a half, several monographs on Spinoza’s moral theory have been published by Anglo-American philosophers. Michael LeBuffe’s *From Bondage to Freedom*, is a general study of the *Ethics* that foregrounds Spinoza’s moral psychology and value theory. Matthew Kisner’s *Spinoza on Human Freedom* focuses, as the title indicates, on Spinoza’s concept of freedom, which Kisner sees as a plausible alternative to untenable forms of libertarianism and crude Hobbesian compatibilism. Like the scholars discussed in the preceding section, Kisner calls attention to the role in the imagination in Spinoza’s conception of practical reason, and he draws connections to contemporary feminist theory in arguing that, for Spinoza, autonomy is socially or relationally constituted. Andrew Youpa’s recent book, *The Ethics of Joy*, defends the view that Spinoza is a moral realist, or one who thinks that moral predicates, like “good” and “bad,” refer to real—though relational—properties of things. Kisner and Youpa also edited what I believe is the first English language essay collection devoted exclusively to Spinoza’s moral thought (*Essays on Spinoza’s Ethical Theory*), most of the contributors to which are based in Anglo-America. Daniel Garber,

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39 Cook, “Spinoza’s Place,” 58.
42 A collection of essays has recently been published on this topic, see Aurelia Armstrong, Keith Green, and Andrea Sangiacomo, eds. *Spinoza and Relational Autonomy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). Many of the contributors, including Kisner, are from Anglophone countries.
Steven Nadler, Donald Rutherford should also be singled out for their contributions to our understanding of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy.

As for work on Spinoza’s politics, while there was a smattering of studies written in the twentieth century, most of them were characterized by a distinctly classically liberal slant, emphasizing Spinoza’s alleged toleration and individualism, perhaps reflecting cold war anti-totalitarian anxieties.  

Much of this work was written by political theorists, who read the political treatises in relative isolation from the *Ethics*.

By contrast, most of the recent Anglophone work on Spinoza’s political philosophy has been written by philosophers, substantially engages with other aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy, and presents a far more complex picture of Spinoza’s relation to liberalism. Two scholars mentioned in the preceding discussion of the imagination—Susan James and Michael Rosenthal—have worked extensively on Spinoza’s political philosophy, demonstrating its richness and philosophical resourcefulness. The case for seeing the aims of the political treatises as continuous with those of the *Ethics*—a standard feature of the French interpretative tradition—was central to my book, *Spinoza’s Political Psychology*. Australian philosopher Sandra Leonie Field’s recent book *Potentia* includes a detailed analysis of Spinoza’s and Hobbes’s notions of popular power that challenges both liberal interpretations and certain collectivist alternatives. And Hasana Sharp’s *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, which is distinctively more “continental” in its methodology and theoretical orientation, explores the ways in which Spinoza’s naturalism might fruitfully challenge the social constructivist mainstream within feminism and ecocriticism.

Sharp and Rosenthal have each co-edited with Melamed scholarly volumes on Spinoza’s *Political Treatise* and his TTP, respectively. (Once again, many, but not all, of the contributors to these volumes are Anglo-American.) The publication of these collections, along with the appearance in 2016 of the long-awaited second volume of Curley’s translation of Spinoza’s *Collected Works*, which contains both political treatises, have helped to bring more readers to Spinoza’s political writings. A Hackett edition of the complete works, translated by Samuel Shirley, appeared in 2002.

Spinoza’s views of religion have also garnered recent attention. While Leo Strauss’s twentieth-century classic *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* focused on the critical dimension of Spinoza’s religious writings, British scholar Clare Carlisle’s recent book, *Spinoza’s Religion*, takes Spinoza to be a


sincere religious thinker in his own right, specifically a panentheist who doggedly pursues the implications of Ep15: “whatever is, is in God.” While Carlisle emphasizes ways in which Spinoza’s “religion of the heart,” as she puts it, echoes earlier Christian philosophers, a good deal recent Anglophone scholarship has also stressed the medieval Muslim and especially Jewish sources of his philosophy. This includes work by Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Carlos Fraenkel, Warren Zev Harvey, Julie Klein, Michael Morgan, Steven Nadler, and Heidi Ravven, to name just a few. Undoubtedly, philosophers and religious studies scholars alike will continue to wrestle with his unorthodox philosophical theology and his vexed relationship to Judaism and Jewish Philosophy.

5 The Man, the Myth, the Legend

The past 25 years have seen the flourishing not only of philosophical work on Spinoza, but also of work on Spinoza outside of academic philosophy. This has been facilitated by the publication of several prominent, well-regarded, and relatively accessible works on Spinoza’s life and legacy. Steven Nadler’s Spinoza: A Life, which first appeared in 1999 and has since undergone a second edition, is a richly informative and highly readable account of the Jewish community in Amsterdam into which Spinoza was born, the ragtag community of freethinkers with whom the apostatized Spinoza consortred, and Spinoza’s own intellectual development over the course of his all-too-brief life. Jonathan Israel’s magisterial, if controversial, Radical Enlightenment and its numerous follow-ups (including the recently published Spinoza’s Life and Legacy) painstakingly chart the impact of Spinozism on the development of egalitarian, anticlerical thought in the European enlightenment, situating Spinoza as the modern founder of core progressive values.

For those seeking brisker, less academic treatments of Spinoza, there is no shortage of relatively recent offerings from Anglophone authors. There is: Matthew Stewart’s portrayal of Leibniz and Spinoza, The Courtier and the Heretic, in which the heretic is the unmistakable hero; Antonio Damasio’s Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain, which joins a discussion of Spinoza’s life and philosophy to a popular presentation of the author’s work in neurobiology; Rebecca Goldstein’s Betraying Spinoza, which claims that in defending a rational universalism that runs contrary to his Jewish upbringing, Spinoza reveals himself to be a kind of quintessential secular Jew; Tracy Matyzik’s When Spinoza Met Marx, which explores Spinoza’s influence on nineteenth century socialist thought; and even Bruce Levine’s A Profession Without Reason, which bears the grandiose subtitle The Crisis of Contemporary Psychiatry—Untangled and Solved by Spinoza, Freethinking, and Radical Enlightenment. And if these books are still too wordy for one’s taste, Nadler and his

son Ben have published a graphic novel, *Heretics!*, in which our favorite heretic figures prominently.\textsuperscript{55} One could go on and on. Spinoza seems to be everywhere these days.

### 6 Appropriations and Extensions

The last several decades have also witnessed the emergence of appropriations of Spinoza’s philosophy. I will simply describe two instances from philosophical psychology.

The first concerns belief-formation, where psychologists and philosophers alike have recently defended, partially on empirical grounds, what has come to be known as the “Spinozan” theory of belief formation, a position that originated in Daniel Gilbert’s pioneering research.\textsuperscript{56} Gilbert and others defend the theses, attributed to Spinoza, that doubt and disbelief are posterior to, and more effortful than, belief, and that to comprehend something is, initially, to accept it. Leaving aside how this view is supported, it suffices to say that this is a live, if still somewhat controversial, account of belief-formation, and one which, if right, has far reaching epistemic and normative implications.\textsuperscript{57}

Just as there is a “Spinozan” theory of belief-formation, there is also a “Spinozan” theory of emotions, as advanced by the aforementioned Damasio, who defends a Spinoza-inspired “feeling theory” (aka “neo-Jamesian theory”) of emotion. On Damasio’s account, emotions are perceived changes to, or disturbances of, one’s homeostatic functioning (read: striving).

I think that scholars would do well to pay attention to appropriations not only to correct misrepresentations of Spinoza, but also to identify ways in which Spinoza’s own account might actually improve upon, or offer an intriguing alternative to, “Spinozan” positions. As scholarly and non-scholarly interest in Spinoza continues to wax, the application of Spinoza’s thought to contemporary philosophical problems and positions, either as part of an appropriationist project or as a corrective to one, remains a fertile frontier for research.

### 7 Conclusion

This is all just a small, and somewhat idiosyncratic, sample of the state of twenty-first century Anglophone Spinoza studies. The field is clearly booming without any sight of contraction, with national and regional societies and circles cropping up everywhere, including, but not limited to: the North American Spinoza Society (NASS), the Spinoza Society of Canada, and the London Spinoza Circle. While Anglophone Spinoza studies could still stand to be somewhat less parochial,

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there is reason to think that as Spinoza studies become increasingly internationalized—with further global conferences like the Dutch Congress of 2023, the launching of this journal, the Edinburgh Press Spinoza Studies series (edited by Filippo del Lucchese), and various other initiatives—new avenues of research that I cannot yet foresee will open up. I look forward to hearing about these developments at the next Spinoza house celebration.

References


