Reconceiving Spinoza

Samuel Newlands [Oxford University Press, forthcoming]

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Introduction

> But there is a limit to thinking about even a small piece of something monumental. You still see the shadow of the whole rearing up behind you, and you become lost in your thoughts in part from the panic of realizing the *size* of that imagined leviathan.
>
> – Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*, 93.

Before achieving literary fame, T.S. Eliot published an article in *The Monist* comparing the philosophical systems of Leibniz and Bradley. He closed with a lovely prediction about their respective legacies:

> Mr. Bradley is a much more skillful, a much more finished philosopher than Leibniz…He has expounded one type of philosophy with such consummate ability that it will probably not survive him. In Leibniz there are possibilities. He has the permanence of the pre-Socratics, of all imperfect things.[1]

Bradley is just too clear and polished to last, Eliot suggests – unlike the vague but suggestive Leibniz, who manages to keep our puzzled attention. Eliot's prediction turned out to be correct, although excessive clarity was probably not the main cause of Bradley's eclipse. Even so, Eliot's observation that a little indeterminacy ensures interest by future generations of scholars applies at least as well, if not better, to Spinoza.

Spinoza's philosophy is also "unfinished" in the sense that it leaves open large spaces of interpretive possibilities. It is both a blessing and a curse that Spinoza's surviving corpus can be held comfortably in one hand. For all the power and scope of his

[1] Eliot, "Leibniz's Monads and Bradley's Finite Centers," 576

philosophical vision, Spinoza is often frustratingly short on details and elucidations. Even when friendly correspondents wrote for clarifications, Spinoza often simply repeated himself and chastised the inquirer for asking. *Just read what I said again and think harder!*

So perhaps Spinoza himself is partly responsible for attracting a bewildering array of interpretative labels over the past 350 years. He has been presented as a radicalized Cartesian. No, another camp argues, he's a Jewish mystic. A God-forsaken atheist. No, a God-drunken pantheist. A proto-idealist. A proto-physicalist. Rationalist. Humanist. Naturalist. Post-modernist. Liberal democrat. Communitarian. Libertarian. The list goes on. (My personal favorite: in a review of an off-Broadway play about Spinoza's excommunication, Spinoza is characterized as "perky and adorable," which I like to think of as *the real Spinoza*.[2]) Entire generations of Spinoza studies have swung between some of these interpretive poles, shifts that probably reveal more about the dominant ethos of the interpreters' intellectual culture than about Spinoza's views.

But if Eliot is correct, the fact that Spinoza's writings leave open so many possibilities is also an indication of the imperfection of the views themselves. Or perhaps, more charitably, it points to the insufficiencies of these categories for exhaustively capturing Spinoza's rich and imaginative philosophical vision. Either way, I will not be offering a new "Spinoza the ____" in this book. Whether the fault lies with Spinoza, his readers or the categories themselves, a new label would likely fall as short as so many others have.

[2] Isherwood, "So, Young Mr. Spinoza," E1

Instead, I will provide a systematic reading of the core of Spinoza's metaphysical and ethical projects that tries to do justice to his innovative doctrines, while also treating him as an illuminating conversation partner for contemporary philosophical discussions. Spinoza was a bold philosopher, and bold philosophers deserve bold interpretations. This book attempts to capture some of the bold, visionary nature of Spinoza's system, while also exploring the subtle and penetrating richness that distinguishes Spinoza's boldness from mere craziness.

Spinoza's compressed writing style presents a steep interpretative challenge. Nevertheless, Spinoza's theories, properly understood, provide important and distinctive alternatives to contemporary views. As such, the philosophically rich payout makes overcoming these interpretive challenges well worth the effort. I hope the result of this study is an interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy that, while drawing on the interpretive advances of others, is ultimately as bold, innovative, and subtle as Spinoza himself intended it to be.

1. Spinoza Studies Today

After centuries of derision and castigation, Spinoza has come to occupy a central place in philosophical, historical, religious and political narratives of the early modern period. Ours is the golden age of Spinoza studies, and the great enthusiasm for all-things-Spinoza shows little signs of waning. Once the exclusive province of philosophers, Spinoza now attracts the attention of intellectual historians, political theorists, religious scholars, playwrights, and even contemporary neuroscientists. Within academic philosophy, articles, books and volumes on Spinoza appear frequently and regularly in top presses. Nor is philosophical interest in Spinoza limited to early modern specialists.

There has been an increasing awareness that Spinoza's views on, for instance, mind-body relations, representationalist theories of the mind, the imagination, modality, teleology, political organizations, ontological dependence and philosophical naturalism can provide important contributions to contemporary philosophical projects.

Although this boon of interest in Spinoza has been good for those of us laboring in the field – one shudders at the career prospects of a Spinoza specialist 70 years ago – it has not been cost-free. Attempts to offer grand re-readings of Spinoza's *Ethics* are increasingly rare. Compartmentalized into journal-length articles and driven by a cadre of specialists and tenure demands, analytic-minded Spinoza studies in particular are in danger of devolving into a technocratic affair in which bits of the *Ethics* are simply rearranged in a dialect of Spinoza-ese that renders the whole affair dull to outsiders and insiders alike.

Previous generations of interpreters resisted this insularity impulse by connecting Spinoza's views to their own contexts. Efforts to draw Spinoza into the orbit of British idealism led to a revitalization of Spinoza studies at the turn of the 20th century. Similar renaissances in Spinoza studies occurred on both sides of the Channel in the mid 20th century, as Spinoza was read through the lens of then-current analytic philosophy and French structuralism. Although it is obviously not the only contemporary context, speculative metaphysics has emerged as a leading research area in Anglo-American philosophy over the past four decades, and this flourishing of analytic metaphysics provides another occasion to wrestle with Spinoza's claims in fresh and exciting ways.[3]

To pick on myself: it is fine and well to try to figure out Spinoza's views on

[3] For good examples of engaging Spinoza within other contemporary contexts, see Vardoulakis, *Spinoza Now* and Gatens, *Feminist Interpretations of Spinoza.*

metaphysical dependence relations through a close reading of dense texts. But unless that can be integrated into contemporary philosophical interests as well as Spinoza's own broader project, those of us working on this topic will be in danger of both domesticating a truly bold philosopher and closing ourselves off to vibrant parts of our own philosophical communities. That would be a loss both for Spinoza studies and for our fellow philosophers. Although I undoubtedly fall short, I offer an integrated account of Spinoza's metaphysical and ethical projects that is relevant to my own context in analytic philosophy and that challenges fellow interpreters to wrestle anew with Spinoza's big, bold, hubristic, swing-for-the-fences ideas. If, in the end, we still miss the interpretive mark, let us at least miss with gusto.

In this way, I will treat Spinoza like any fruitful philosophical conversation partner.[4] As a good dialogue partner, Spinoza can challenge contemporary paradigms and provide rich alternatives. At the same time, his claims can be understood within present frameworks; they are not *wholly* other. This enables us to both challenge and be challenged by Spinoza. We need not be passive before his texts, unwilling to philosophically wrestle with his views on our own terms and acknowledge the presence of mistakes or confusions. But neither are we so uncharitable that we approach his texts with the assumption that his views are almost surely wrong, leaving us the glum task of enumerating flaws. Like good conversationalists, we ought to employ a generous hermeneutic of charity – though not as apologists. Rather, we work hard to read Spinoza in the best possible light in order to learn the most we can from him.

[4] Others have used this image as well. See Curley, "Dialogues with the Dead,"; Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*; Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*; Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*.

This approach allows us to apply contemporary philosophical categories to Spinoza's texts in order to better engage his views. In doing so, we can see how Spinoza fits into some contemporary frameworks and yet retains distinctive elements that those categories do not fully capture. This is not the only fruitful approach one might take, of course. One could try to situate Spinoza more fully in his own historical context 350 years ago, for example. But I have learned the most from Spinoza by approaching him as an ongoing conversation partner, dancing between the familiar and the original, and so it is here that I have found him to be the most philosophically engaging. More than anything, I hope this monograph provides a fresh example of how philosophically exciting Spinoza can be when approached in this way.

2. A Quick Plunge

Catching a fresh glimpse of Spinoza is difficult in part because he was such a systematic thinker. His major work, *The Ethics*, is a tightly crafted book whose Euclidean style highlights what he saw as the connections – sometimes surprising – among metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, psychology, philosophy of mind, action theory, politics, the natural sciences, and even religious beliefs and practices. On Spinoza's approach to philosophy, untangling problems in moral philosophy requires attending to issues in human psychology, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind.

Similarly, adequately understanding one's inner life of beliefs, desires, sensations, imaginings, and emotions requires a scientifically rigorous exploration of the external world, a religious examination of the nature of God, and metaphysical scrutiny about the nature of intentionality. For Spinoza, philosophical investigations are all-or-nothing affairs. Given what he takes to be the interconnections among these branches of inquiry,

Spinoza concludes that making progress on one philosophical question often requires making simultaneous advances on many others.

More concretely, Spinoza believes that metaphysics and science together form the foundation of ethics. In an echo of Descartes' famed "tree of philosophy" image, Spinoza writes to a correspondent that ethics "must be founded on metaphysics and physics," adding that "knowledge of [metaphysics] must always come first" (Ep27, G IV/161). Spinoza tries to realize this ambition in the *Ethics*, in which the path to blessedness and salvation winds through a carefully crafted metaphysics and, to a lesser extent, a framework for science.[5] Spinoza's metaphysics is highly developed, and his views have been the focus of several excellent studies in recent years. But the general connection between Spinoza's speculative metaphysics and his ethical theory has remained elusive.[6] In *Reconceiving Spinoza*, I return to Spinoza's self-described foundational project and provide an integrated interpretation of his metaphysical system and the way in which his metaphysics shapes, and is shaped by, his moral program.

Spinoza's systematic approach to philosophy is underwritten by his explanatory naturalism. "Naturalism" has become a catchall term in contemporary philosophy, so widely and regularly applied that it appears, at best, to have several different meanings. Without trying to disambiguate contemporary usage, I will call Spinoza's *explanatory*

[5] Spinoza's physics is programmatic at best, and near the end of his life, he noted with an air of regret that with respect to fundamental physics, he "had not had the opportunity to arrange in due order anything on this subject" (Ep 83, G IV/334).

[6] The tendency to neglect or marginalize Spinoza's ethical theory in analytic circles is waning, however. See the recent monographs of LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom*, and Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom*, as well as the fine collection of essays in Kisner and Youpa, *Spinoza's Ethical Theory*.

naturalism the position he sketches in the Preface to Part III of the *Ethics*:

> Nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e, the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely through the universal laws and rules of Nature (G II/138).

In this passage, Spinoza makes two important claims about explanation. First, everything can be understood or explained through "the laws and rules of Nature." This reminds us of Spinoza's general commitment to the explicability of all things, a view captured in his version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR): "For each thing, there must be assigned a cause or reason for its existence, if it exists, as well as for its non-existence, if it does not exist" (Ip11d). That is already a steep requirement, but Spinoza's explanatory commitment is even more demanding. As we will see, Spinoza demands more than the explanation of every *thing*; even more abstract matters, including metaphysical explanations themselves, require explanation.

Although Spinoza's explanatory naturalism is consistent with the explanatory rationalism embodied in the PSR, it goes further than the PSR itself. Explanatory naturalism, as Spinoza's second point in the *Preface* passage makes clear, also informs the scope of proper explanations. Spinoza claims that the *explanans* – "the laws and rules of Nature" – are changeless and universal in the sense that they always apply across all domains of *explananda*. Proper explanatory principles, for Spinoza, do not admit of exception clauses. Spinoza thinks making exceptions to the scope of explanatory principles is indicative of the failure of those principles to adequately explain. Earlier in

the *Preface*, Spinoza criticized those who try to make human beings "a dominion within a dominion." Presumably he is targeting philosophers like Descartes, who tried to explain the nature and activity of thinking things using a set of principles that were not supposed to apply within the purely extended domain of physics. Spinoza objects that proper explanatory principles are universally applicable. Everything plays by the same rules.

Putting these points together, Spinoza's explanatory naturalism is the thesis that each of the most basic explanatory principles applies universally and, taken together, the basic explanatory principles suffice to explain everything, even God. If, for example, possessing intentional mental states partly explains God's activity, then so too will possessing intentional mental states partly explain the activities of humans, trees, and rocks. There will, of course, be differences in complexity and degrees among the *explananda*, but there are no differences in explanatory scope among the most fundamental explanatory principles, according to Spinoza.

Hence, in addition to affirming PSR-style demands for the explanation of everything, Spinoza's explanatory naturalism places a high demand on the explanations themselves. Explanatory principles must be constant, exceptionless, and applicable across all domains. This leads Spinoza to seek out principles that can do such work.

One such explanatory principle lies at the heart of this book, so I will highlight it here. From beginning to end, Spinoza's *Ethics* is full of appeals to conceptual relations. The opening and closing passages of the *Ethics* each invoke the conceptual. In the opening definition of Part One, Spinoza claims that self-causation involves a *conceptual* connection between a thing's nature and existence. In the book's final paragraph, Spinoza appeals to the wise man's tranquility "insofar as he is considered as such [*quatenus ut talis consideratur*]" (Vp42s, G II/308). In the first instance, the conceptual relation serves

as part of the *explanans*. In the last, Spinoza qualifies his claim by appealing to a conceptual relation. While this conceptual bookending of the *Ethics* may be interesting in itself, Spinoza invokes the conceptual in similar ways all throughout the *Ethics*. He regularly appeals to conceptual relations in his explanations, and he frequently qualifies his views in terms of how things are considered or conceived. Indeed, once the ubiquity of the conceptual is pointed out, its pervasive presence throughout the *Ethics* is striking.

Nevertheless, Spinoza's frequent references to the conceptual are easily overlooked, at least judging by the scant attention they have received from his interpreters. One possible explanation of this neglect is that it is unclear what work these conceptual appeals are doing in many passages. For example, they might just be innocuous instances of bad writing. Perhaps when Spinoza refers to "the wise man insofar as he is considered as such," this is just a clunky way of referring to the wise man. More generally, perhaps Spinoza's references to how things are *conceived* are just longwinded ways of referring to how things *are*, at least when they are conceived truly. If so, readers could be excused for breezing past such locutions, despite their frequency in the text.

That is one interpretative possibility, but it is not a very convincing one. As we will see, there are too many passages, such as the opening propositions of Part Two of the *Ethics*, in which claims about how things are conceived are obviously central to Spinoza's arguments. There is no plausible way of reading *those* references to the conceptual as lamentable instances of overwriting. But if Spinoza's appeals to the conceptual are at least sometimes essential to the views he is defending – as most parties would agree – that should give us at least a strong *prima facie* reason to avoid gliding quickly over other, more innocuous-looking uses of expressions like "conceived as" or

"insofar as it is considered as."

One of the overarching theses of this book is that conceptual relations form the backbone of Spinoza's explanatory project and perform a surprising amount of work in his metaphysics and ethics. As I mentioned, Spinoza's explanatory naturalism extends not only to *things* but also to highly abstract metaphysical affairs, such how things depend on other things and even to the nature of explanation itself. Nothing gets a free explanatory pass for Spinoza, and he often relies on the conceptual to account for many of the most general categories and principles in his system.

Conceptual relations also serve as Spinoza's main philosophical tool for consistently satisfying seemingly inconsistent desiderata. Conceptual relations are the philosophical grease that keeps the Spinozistic machine running smoothly, allowing him to do everything from reconciling monism with diversity to providing non-prudential grounds for altruism within an ethical egoist framework. One of my main goals is to exhibit how much work conceptual relations do for Spinoza and how much seeing this changes our understanding of his philosophical outlook.

For instance, Spinoza's theory of minds and bodies is one of the better-known places in which conceptual relations are clearly doing important work. He writes, "The modes of each attribute have God for their cause only insofar as he is considered under the attribute of which they are modes, and not insofar as he is considered under any other attribute" (IIp6). Setting aside the ontological details for now, Spinoza's basic claim is that whether or not a thing is caused by God depends in part on how God is considered or conceived. Conceived one way – as thinking, say – God stands in a causal relation to a mode; conceived a different way – as extended, say – God does not stand in that causal relation. Causal facts, we might now put it, are sensitive to how the causal relata are

conceived.

If true, this would be a surprising feature of causation. We typically think that whether *x* causes *y* does not depend on how *x* and *y* are conceived or considered. Causation seems like a concept-independent manner of dependence. Granted, we might *use* concepts to represent or describe objects, to make causal ascriptions, or to specify the causally relevant features of objects, but those guises do not seem to be parts of the world's causal structure. Spinoza disagrees, I will argue. Causal relations are fine-grained affairs, involving not only objects but also some of the ways in which those objects are conceived. The world's causal structure is, at least in part, conceptually structured.

Although this is a surprising claim about causation, it is but one example of Spinoza's tendency to connect ways of being with ways of being conceived. For another example, we typically do not treat the modal status of a thing's existence – whether a thing exists necessarily or not – as dependent on how that thing is conceived.[7] Nonetheless, Spinoza claims that modality too depends on how objects are conceived. Conceived in certain ways, a thing exists necessarily; conceived in other ways, it exists contingently. Modality is not a concept-independent matter for Spinoza, I will argue, a conclusion that resonates with some contemporary anti-essentialist accounts of modality. Indeed, it will turn out that the essences and even the individuation of things have important conceptual conditions, according to Spinoza. More generally, the rich metaphysical structure of the world – which and how things depend on other things – tracks a rich structure of conceptual dependence for Spinoza. Getting clear on the

[7] By "modal status" and similar locutions from here on, I am referring to the *modality* of a thing's existence in contemporary parlance – e.g., whether it exists necessarily or contingently – and not to Spinoza's ontological category of modes or modifications.

motivations and details of all this, as well as the interpretive case for attributing it to Spinoza, is the focus of the first six chapters of this book.

Introducing all this conceptual sensitivity into metaphysics might seem worrisome at the outset, independent of the details. Given that we typically do not think of, say, causal and modal structures as concept-sensitive, why does Spinoza think otherwise? Spinoza's general defense, I will argue repeatedly, is to explain conceptual sensitivity with an even stronger thesis of *conceptual identification*. The causal structure of the world is sensitive to different ways of conceiving the world because causal relations just are conceptual relations. Modality is concept-sensitive because necessary connections just are conceptual connections. In other words, lurking behind Spinoza's invocations of the conceptual are even bolder identity theories that, if true, explain and justify all the conceptual sensitivity.

Far from doubling down on the crazy, these identifications follow from Spinoza's broader explanatory naturalism, which the mere co-variation of conceptual and causal or modal relations would violate. Conceptual sensitivity and conceptual variability themselves cry out for explanation, and Spinoza repeatedly answers with an identity thesis. (As for what *justifies* his identity theses…well, that turns on Spinoza's claims about God, metaphysical perfection, and explanation more generally, as we will see.)

Conceptual sensitivity might seem especially worrisome if it is paired with *conceptual pluralism*, the thesis that there are multiple, true ways of conceiving one and the same thing. This combination appears to generate pairs of predications, such as "x is F" and "it is not the case that x is F", which are both true, each under a different way of conceiving *x*. (And if that doesn't seem worrisome in the abstract, substitute "exists necessarily" or "causes only extended effects" for "is F.") Even if one tried to

build conceptual sensitivity into the semantics of the predicates to avoid outright contradictions, we might still wonder how both predications could be true. *Surely* one of those ways of conceiving corresponds better to how things "really are." Even if modal facts are concept-sensitive, *surely* there is a unique, privileged way of conceiving the world that settles the modal facts.

For better or worse, Spinoza is rarely moved by such "surely"s, and this is no exception. Spinoza endorses an especially strong form of conceptual pluralism, according to which there are many – infinitely many! – true ways of conceiving the world. He has important reasons for affirming a kind of *expressive plentitude*, according to which each thing can be conceived truly in infinitely many ways along several axes. One axis tracks different fundamental kinds (e.g., thinking vs. extended); another tracks completeness (e.g., partial vs. complete causal history). I will argue that none of these myriad ways of conceiving objects is intrinsically truer than the others, for Spinoza. None of them better represents the ways things "really are" in themselves. None best describes the sole privileged standpoint from which all these metaphysical matters are settled. Spinoza's expressive plenitude blocks such privileging. But if metaphysical facts about modality, dependence, essences, power, and individuation vary, depending on how things are conceived, and if there are multiple ways of truly conceiving things, some of which entail that things have distinct metaphysical features and none of which is intrinsically privileged over the others – is Spinoza stuck in a quagmire of metaphysical relativism?

Spinoza does not seem to think so, and he repeatedly urges his readers to adopt some of these ways of conceiving the world over others. For example, he urges us to adopt especially broad ways of conceiving things, ways that include relations to infinitely many other things. So conceived, things necessarily exist, and so Spinoza encourages his

readers to adopt necessitarian outlooks on the world. But given his modal metaphysics, such exhortations cannot be based on a greater correspondence between these broader ways of conceiving and the modal status of things independently of how they are conceived. So why does he privilege some ways over others, if not based on something like verisimilitude?

Here we begin to discern an important link between Spinoza's conceptualist metaphysics and his moral theory. Spinoza thinks we have practical motivations to pursue broader conceptual vantage points. There is no intrinsic privileging mechanism, but there are *extrinsic* ones. Some ways of conceiving the world are better *for us* to adopt than others, even though that advantage is not based on better truth-tracking. Grasping some ways of conceiving the world enable us to be more active and more reliably satisfy our fundamental desire. Spinoza identifies these practical advantages with our individual, self-interested pursuits of greater power, which he thinks lie at the foundations of morality. Hence, Spinoza thinks we will each be more powerful if we conceive the world in certain ways, and on that basis he urges us to strive do so. (Alas, as we will see, Spinoza is also fairly pessimistic about our chances of success in this endeavor.)

This practical privileging is one way in which Spinoza's ethics fill out his metaphysics, but the dependence runs in the other direction as well. For example, I argue in later chapters that Spinoza's project of moral transformation centers on improving our intellects precisely because those improvements allow us to adopt broader ways conceiving of the world. Furthermore, given Spinoza's metaphysics of individuals, a moral agent's interests and even self-identity can vary, relative to some of these different ways of being conceived. This will have the startling implication that Spinoza's ethical egoism, when combined with his concept-sensitive metaphysics, is ultimately a call to a

radical kind of self-transcendence. We will thus be challenged to reconceive not only the world, but also to reconceive Spinoza's project, and perhaps even ourselves, along the way.

A final general worry is that all this concept-dependent metaphysics will turn Spinoza's system into some kind of idealist playground. I should admit upfront that I find idealist readings of Spinoza more textually and philosophically defensible than they are often taken to be these days.[8] But in the end, I do not think the general idealist interpretation of Spinoza, according to which God, attributes and modes are essentially mind- or thought-dependent, is sustainable.

But if I am correct about both the conceptual-*dependence* and the mind-*independence* of the bulk of Spinoza's metaphysics, we seem to be left with an unhappy interpretative question: which one should he have abandoned? For many years, I thought this grim choice was unavoidable and that Spinoza himself was ultimately saddled with a deep and unresolvable tension, even if a philosophically interesting one.

However, I have come to believe that this represents a false choice and that Spinoza maintains conceptual dependence without mind-dependence in a way that fits elegantly with the rest of his ontology. This solution requires separating the realm of the mental – ideas, minds, and the attribute of thought – from the realm of the conceptual – concepts, conceiving, and conceptual dependence – in Spinoza, which is no easy feat. However, there is good textual evidence for drawing such a distinction, independent of the issue of conceptual dependence. That doing so also enables Spinoza to affirm *both* his concept-laden metaphysics and his anti-idealism provides us yet another reason to

[8] For further discussion, see Newlands, "More Recent Idealist Readings of Spinoza," and Newlands, "Hegel's Idealist Reading of Spinoza."

embrace it as interpreters.

This concludes our quick plunge into the deep end of the Spinozistic pool. I will lay out the book's structure in more detail in the next section. I hope, however, that even this brief overview of the some of the promises and pitfalls of this study will encourage puzzled readers to dig deeper into the details and wrestle with Spinoza's texts and system alongside me. Though deep, the Spinozistic waters are warm and inviting.

3. A Roadmap

[You'll have to buy the book to read the rest!]