"Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Perfection"
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Spinoza often criticized other philosophers for reifying what he took to be mind-dependent entities or features. He warns his readers to be on guard against this reifying tendency, lest we "fall into great errors, as has happened to many before us" (CM I/1, G I/236). Confusing the mind-dependent with the mind-independent – the "abstract" with the "real," to use Spinoza's terminology – is "something a true philosopher must scrupulously avoid" (KV II 4, G I/60). The range of errors that Spinoza thinks stems from such false reifications is impressive; everything from faculty psychology to libertarian accounts of freedom to belief in miracles to even Zeno's paradox involves such an error, according to Spinoza.[1]

Perhaps most famously, Spinoza claims that traditional moral properties like *good* and *evil* are also not mind-independent features of things: "As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another" (E4Pref, G II/208). Although Spinoza tries to salvage some utility for moral discourse, he does not believe that *goodness* and *evil* are moral features of things that obtain independently of human judgments.[2]

Spinoza might appear to consign notions of *perfection* and *imperfection* to a similar fate. Just before rejecting moral realism in the previously cited passage, Spinoza seems to reject what I will call "perfection realism." "Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only

[1] For a full discussion of this charge and its putative ramifications, see Newlands, "Spinoza's Anti-Abstractionism."
[2] This interpretation is not wholly free from controversy. For one of many defenses, see Jarrett, "Spinoza's Constructivism." For a different account, see Eugene Marshall's chapter in this volume.

modes of thinking, i.e., notions we are accustomed to feign because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another" (E4Pref; G II/207). The parallel he is trying to draw seems quite clear. Perfection and imperfection, like good and evil, are not mind-independent features of things. To think otherwise is to lapse back into making false reifications, the sort of confusion of *entia reale* and *entia rationis* that Spinoza has been urging his readers to avoid since his earliest writings. This is how Leibniz read Spinoza here, which prompted him to complain that Spinoza "eliminated perfection from things as a chimera of our mind."[3]

But this cannot be the whole story. For throughout Spinoza's early works, correspondence, and in the *Ethics* itself, Spinoza frequently appeals to the perfection of various things, including the world itself, to advance controversial metaphysical views. He frames the goal of his earliest writing project, "healing the intellect," in terms of achieving human perfection: "So now it will be evident to everyone that my purpose is to direct all the sciences to one end and goal, to wit (as we have said), the achievement of the highest human perfection" (*TIE* 16, G II/9).[4] Perfection lies at the heart of Spinoza's mature account of human emotions and psychology (E3p11s). He embeds it in his discussion of virtue and the moral life (E5p40s). Spinoza also links perfection to a thing's power and essence, two key concepts in his system (E3GenDef, G II/204).

In addition to these more general connections, Spinoza asserts various principles concerning a thing's perfection, such as: "an effect is most perfect which is produced immediately by God, and the more something requires several intermediate causes to produce it, the more imperfect it is" (E1App; G II/80); "the more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on; and, conversely, the more it acts, the more perfect it is"

[3] Leibniz, AG, 233.
[4] See also *TTP* Ch. 4, art. 4, G III/60.

(E5p40).[5] Spinoza also appeals casually to God's perfection in his ontological argument, arguing that it would be "absurd" to ascribe a contradictory nature to God, who is, after all, "a Being absolutely infinite and supremely perfect" (E1p11d; G II/53, my emphasis).[6] Spinoza correspondingly rejects alternative philosophical views on the ground that they would "take away God's perfection" (E1App; G II/80). Spinoza even correlates the perfection of particular things with the extent to which they "participate" in God's own perfection (E4p45s, G II/244 and Ep 19, G IV/94).

These claims all seem to presuppose that perfection is, at least sometimes, grounded in something other than a human comparative judgment. So in at least some cases, Spinoza appears to treat perfection as a mind-independent property of things, the world, and God. But in light of his critique of perfection realism, how can this be?

In the first part of this chapter, I argue that Spinoza's critique of perfection realism is narrower than it initially seems, allowing him to treat what I will call a "purely metaphysical" notion of perfection as a mind-independent property of things and the world. In the second section, I outline one important element of Spinoza's purely metaphysical notion of perfection, one that sheds light on some of his otherwise puzzling ontological commitments. In the third section, I buttress this interpretation by pointing to two advocates of similar structural accounts of perfection who hail from very different eras: the young Leibniz and Jonathan Schaffer.

1. Spinoza's (Limited) Critique of Perfection

I claimed that Spinoza sometimes criticizes realist accounts of perfection as resting on a false reification of "mere [human] modes of thought," while in other contexts, he seems to

[5] For other examples, see E1p11s, G II/54; E2p1s; E2p49cs, G II/135.
[6] Spinoza's reasoning here *vividly* illustrates the mistake Leibniz would soon point out in such traditional formulations of the ontological argument.

treat perfection as a mind-independent property of things. Before proceeding further, I want to mention and then set aside one quick but unsatisfying way of trying to resolve this tension.

One might respond that Spinoza's identification of *reality* and *perfection* is his novel and preferred way of securing a mind-independent basis for perfection. Spinoza writes, "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing" (E2d6), and he explicitly refers back to this definition in the Preface to Part Four (G II/209). The general idea is that by reducing mind-independent perfection to another, more Spinoza-friendly mind-independent notion (*reality*), Spinoza can consistently invoke the traditional language of divine and natural perfection without falling prey to his later critiques of such appeals.[7]

Although this suggestion is in the right neighborhood, I do not think it gets us very far on its own. For one, identification is not reduction. Although it is a bit unclear whether Spinoza intends his definition in E2d6 to apply to terms or to properties, it is clear that he intends to identify either the intensions of "perfection" and "reality" or the properties *being perfect* and *being real*. Either way, identification cuts both ways. So unless Spinoza can provide a mind-independent account of the notion of *reality*, his claim that perfection is identical to reality threatens to make *reality* as mind-dependent as he seems to later claim *perfection* is. After all, Spinoza rejects the use of transcendental terms like "Being" in metaphysics, claiming that they arise from confused abstractions.[8] Even worse, some of his critiques of perfection realism seem to provide equally good reasons for rejecting *reality realism* as well, absurd as that sounds.

[7] For examples of such an appeal, see Goldenbaum, "The Affects as a Condition of Human Freedom in Spinoza's *Ethics*," 152 and Jarrett, "Spinoza's Constructivism," 69. For a related Spinoza-friendly identification of perfection and power, see Garrett, "Representation and Consciousness in Spinoza's Naturalistic Theory of the Imagination," 13-14.

[8] E2p40s, G II/120-121; see E1d6 for a key passage in which Spinoza transgresses his own rejection.

Furthermore, there is nothing novel about tightly associating reality and perfection in metaphysics. That association has a long and rich heritage running through Platonism and medieval Christianity, all the way up to, and including, Descartes.[9] So if Spinoza intended his definition to somehow cut away the chaff of traditional perfection realists, he must have been woefully ignorant of how thoroughly traditional such an association had been in past centuries, as well as in his own. (Indeed, Spinoza must have even forgotten his own earlier book on Descartes, in which he attributes this very identification to Descartes, almost quoting the Second Replies verbatim to do so![10]). Although I do not think Spinoza was especially well informed or savvy about the history of ideas, even I find it implausible that he would have taken himself to be forging new ground with this identification.

In fact, one has to wait until the early Kant to find an example of a prominent Western philosopher who explicitly rejects the perfection-reality association: "The reason [for not referring to 'perfection'] is not that I thought all reality was the same as all perfection, or that perfection consisted in the highest degree of harmony in one. I have weighty reasons for strongly disagreeing with this widely held opinion" (OPB, 134, my emphasis).[11]

Nevertheless, Spinoza does hold a more radical view about the nature of perfection, one not quite captured by E2d6 itself. His more contentious thesis is that *perfection is not an intrinsically normative or moral feature of the world*. Spinoza's notion of perfection is what I will call "purely metaphysical," a mind-independent feature of things that can be characterized wholly in structural terms without appeal to moral or normative properties. If so, then Spinoza does not reject the mind-independent perfection of God, the world, or

[9] For but one example, see Aquinas ST I q 4, which in turn appeals back to Pseudo-Dionysius. For Descartes, see CSM II 116, AT VII 165.
[10] See DPP Ia4 and Ia8, G I/154-5.
[11] We will soon see what Kant is referring to by "the highest degree of harmony in one," a particular account of perfection that was shared by Spinoza, the young Leibniz, and arguably even Wolff. (For the perfection-reality connection in Leibniz and Wolff, see L 177, Ak VI.iv.1358, and *TN* II.6.)

particular things – far from it, as we will see in the next section. Instead, Spinoza rejects the further association of metaphysical perfection with moral and normative dimensions. The perfect is neither *good* nor what things *ought* to be like. Imperfection is neither an *evil* nor a *failure*. And with that disassociation, Spinoza certainly parts company with vast stretches of traditional theistic metaphysics.[12]

Before unpacking Spinoza's purely metaphysical notion of perfection further, let us look briefly at his attempt to disentangle perfection from normative and moral commitments. In his book on Descartes, Spinoza breaks into the discussion with a note of his own, as if unable to contain himself: "*Note 2*: We are not speaking here about beauty and the other 'perfections' which men have wished, in their superstition and ignorance, to call perfection. By perfection I mean only reality or being" (C 241-2, G I/165). In the *Ethics,* Spinoza repeats the claim that appeals to perfection are frequently bound up with superstition and ignorance: "We see, therefore, that men are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things" (E4Pref, G II/206).

Spinoza devotes the bulk of the Preface to Part Four to providing a kind of genetic reconstruction of such ignorance-based notions of perfection. He claims that often people assume that a thing's perfection is fixed by how closely it conforms to some extrinsic standard or model. Perhaps that is an acceptable practice for evaluating human artifacts like chairs and houses, but when applied to natural things, such accounts of perfection go deeply astray, according to Spinoza:

> Nor does there seem to be any other reason why men also commonly call natural things, which have not been made by human hand, perfect or imperfect. For they are accustomed to form universal ideas of natural things…They regard these universal ideas as models of things, and believe that nature (which they think does nothing

[12] The aforementioned arguments of Aquinas (ST I q 4-5) become downright unintelligible if Spinoza is correct that perfection is neither moral nor normative. Even the young Kant is traditional on *this* point about perfection (see *OPB* 135).

> except for the sake of some end) looks to them, and sets them before itself as models. So when they see something happen in nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect (E4Pref, G II/206).

However, Spinoza thinks such extrinsic models are themselves merely human constructs, disguised instances of anthropomorphic projection, "human fictions" (E1App, G II/80). They are based on "universal ideas," which for Spinoza are just generalized abstractions of the imagination.[13]

Once in place, such models are then taken to establish the norms of perfection, the standards towards which natural things *ought* to strive. For example, consider the stock medieval example of blindness. Spinoza claims that in virtue of having encountered mostly sighted people, we judge that people naturally ought to be sighted and that people without sight are imperfect insofar as they cannot do what humans ought to be able to do.[14] Here Spinoza imbeds the normative commitment of more traditional accounts of perfection within a broader teleological framework, according to which nature is intrinsically oriented towards some end or goal. But Spinoza thinks this broader teleological framework is yet more anthropomorphic projection onto nature: "For we have shown…that Nature does nothing on account of an end…what is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle or primary cause of some thing." (E4Pref; G II/206-7).

Spinoza concludes that all such normatively laden accounts of perfection are really just measurements of the extent to which things conform to a particular person's desires or expectations. If so, then investigating "a thing's perfection" might be an interesting topic for psychologists, but it is hardly an appropriate subject for metaphysicians.

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[13] See E2p40 and Newlands, "Spinoza on Universals" (forthcoming).
[14] Spinoza makes a similar diagnosis about privative accounts of evil in his correspondence with Blyenbergh (Ep 18-24); see Newlands, "Evils, Privations, and the Early Moderns" (forthcoming) for more.

As if that weren't bad enough, philosophers and theologians then add an element of *moral realism* into this toxic soup of norms, natural teleology, abstract ideas, and anthropomorphic projection. According to Spinoza, they claim that degrees of perfection are also correlated with degrees of *goodness* and cognate axiological notions. "Hence they had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness" (E1App; G II/81). But again, Spinoza rejects this entire cluster of concepts as too human-centric to apply to human-independent things themselves.

I suspect this is why Spinoza's most pointed critique of moral realism occurs where it does in the Preface to Part Four, in the middle of his critique of traditional realist accounts of perfection. Spinoza tries to reject wholesale a tangle of notions that he believes were associated with metaphysical perfection: ends, norms, goodness, failure, privation, and evil.

Spinoza is quite correct about this historical association of moral realism and norms with notions of perfection. But are his criticisms of this association cogent? Not really, at least insofar as one focuses only on the Preface itself. Certainly no decent Scholastic would find Spinoza's genetic story the least bit compelling, or even recognizable on reflection. But that might not be too worrisome for Spinoza, coming as this disentangling project does at the start of Part Four of the *Ethics*. Undoubtedly Spinoza thought he had already offered cogent arguments against the metaphysical supports of such traditional, moral and norm-laden accounts of perfection. All that was left to do was to shed light on why so many people had been so bamboozled for so long.

More importantly, notice that Spinoza's critique leaves untouched measurements of perfection that are not laden with normative or moral components. He makes this point explicitly in the Appendix to Part One, following his denunciation of realist accounts of good, evil, beauty and the like: "For the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature

and power; things are not more or less perfect because they please men's senses or because they are of use to us, or are incompatible with human nature" (E1App, G II/83). Spinoza does not conclude here that perfection is a "chimera of our mind," as Leibniz worried. Instead, he appeals to a mind-independent measurement of perfection, namely the nature and structure of things, a standard that is free from intrinsic moral and normative elements.[15]

Hence Spinoza could consistently affirm the existence of a maximally perfect thing – an *ens perfectissimum* – a thing whose perfection is entirely a function of its intrinsic, amoral structure. Spinoza could also use the maximal perfection of such a thing to explain other features and things without falling into the snares of his own critique. Indeed, Spinoza could even consistently criticize alternative accounts of the world's structure for involving too little metaphysical perfection or too much imperfection. As we will now see, these are among the ways Spinoza actually employs his purely metaphysical account of perfection.

2. The Contours of Spinozistic Metaphysical Perfection

Having secured space for a more realist account of perfection in Spinoza's metaphysics, let us now consider its content and some of the uses to which he puts it. In the most general terms, Spinoza's ontology represents an extraordinary combination of both parsimony and plenitude. I believe that in the background of Spinoza's acceptance of both parsimony and plenitude lies a view about the contours of metaphysical perfection. In this section, I will claim that Spinoza relies on such a purely metaphysical, structural account of perfection to explain and justify some of his general ontological commitments.

I begin with a very brief sketch of what I mean by Spinoza's "general ontological commitments." Spinoza's fondness for ontological parsimony is well known, as his substance monism makes clear. As Spinoza famously claims in his *Ethics*, "Except God, no substance

[15] See also Ep19, G IV/89 for a similar realist conclusion.

can be or be conceived" (E1p14). The next proposition spells out the implications of his monism for all other existing things: "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" (E1p15). That is, whatever exists, exists in substance and locates in substance its causal origins and the grounds for its very intelligibility.

There is much to be said about the dependence relations in those claims, but let us focus on Spinoza's insistence that everything that exists is contained, in some metaphysically robust sense, in a single substance, God. Hence, however rich in kinds, individuals, and properties the world turns out to be, they all must somehow co-exist in that single substance and, conversely, that single substance must be able to consistently support the world's diversity within itself.

Spinoza sometimes states this conclusion as an *identity* thesis, of one and same substance across a multiplicity of fundamental attributes: "The thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance" (E2p7s). (In the same passage, Spinoza extends this identification to any attribute-substance pairing). That is, one and the same substance can have very distinct, fundamental features or attributes. Likewise, Spinoza claims that each mode of the sole substance retains its identity across multiple attributes: "So too a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing just expressed in two ways" (E2p7s; G II/90).[16] Notice the pattern: one substance, multiple attributes; one mode, multiple attributes. Given that substances, modes, and attributes comprise Spinoza's basic ontological categories, we can already discern Spinoza's tendency to affirm both identity and diversity in parallel ways across his ontology.

In addition to his substance and mode identity theories, Spinoza also explicitly identifies items that previous philosophers had treated as distinct, such as: minds and bodies

[16] See also E2p21s and E3p2s.

(E2p7s); ideas and ideas of those ideas (E2p20); human ideas and God's parallel ideas (E2p11c); volitions and ideas (E2p49); the will and the intellect (E2p49c); volitions and the faculty of willing (E2p48s); ideas and the faculty of the intellect (E2p48s); power and virtue (E4d8); power and active essence (E2p7); power and perfection (E4Pref.). Spinoza also identifies seemingly distinct forms of metaphysical dependence. Arguably, causation, inherence, and conceptual dependence are all one and the same form of dependence for Spinoza.[17] Over and over in the *Ethics*, what had seemed to others to be distinct kinds, things, and relations are, according to Spinoza, "one and the same."

But this tendency towards identification and ontological parsimony gives us only half the Spinozistic story. Immediately after concluding in E1p15 that everything is contained in God, Spinoza embraces a stunningly plentiful ontology in the next proposition: "From the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things [i.e., modes] in infinitely many ways [i.e., attributes], (that is, everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)" (E1p16; G II/60).[18] E1p16 claims that infinitely many modes in infinitely many attributes follow from the nature of the sole substance. In other words, both *mode* and *attribute plenitude* follow from the nature of God. Taken together, E1p15 and E1p16 affirm Spinoza's commitment to versions of both maximal parsimony and maximal plenitude at multiple levels in his ontology. Although there is much more to be said about Spinoza's versions of parsimony and plenitude[19], I want to examine the role that metaphysical perfection plays in generating this ontological structure of the One and the Many.

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[17] This is a very controversial interpretative claim; for defense, see Newlands, "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism.".

[18] Here I depart from Curley's translation of this passage. For reasons I've presented elsewhere, I think "*infinita infinitis modis*" refers to infinitely many *modes* [the missing object of "infinita"] in infinitely many *attributes* [the ultimate reference of *modis,* here just "ways"], a parallel Spinoza makes explicit in the demonstration of E1p16.

[19] For a version of my own views, see Newlands "The Harmony of Spinoza and Leibniz," section 2.

I am by no means the first to look for a metaphysical principle or principles around which Spinoza's ontological commitments can be unified. To pick on a recent and illuminating example, Michael Della Rocca has argued in various ways that many of Spinoza's parsimonious commitments stem from Spinoza's rejection of brute distinctions, which is an upshot of his acceptance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Although I admire the systematicity of this interpretation, I do not think the PSR can play all the roles Della Rocca assigns it for Spinoza, at least without making some of Spinoza's arguments question-begging.[20]

More worrisome for the present context, the PSR alone appears consistent with a much more parsimonious ontology: one substance, one attribute (perhaps even one substance, one mode). For consider: in virtue of what is Spinoza's attribute of thought distinct from the attribute of extension? The only PSR-consistent answer is that the distinction is somehow self-explanatory. But if some instances of non-identity are self-explanatory, why couldn't the non-identity of substances likewise be self-explanatory, pace Spinoza's reasoning in E1p4? Tellingly, Della Rocca himself has recently reached a similar conclusion and has begun to argue that only Parmenidean monism – the One without the Many at all – is consistent with the PSR.[21]

But for Spinoza, attribute and mode plenitude cannot be so quickly abandoned, even at the altar of the mighty PSR. What then grounds such diversity, for Spinoza? Or is Spinoza left, as Hegel and later British idealists would charge, with some sort of brute posit of diversity, one which he can neither abandon nor explain?[22]

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[20] See for example, Newlands, "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism," section 4.
[21] This is clearest in his (unpublished) Whitehead Lectures at Harvard University in 2014.
[22] For more on Hegel and company's charge, see Melamed, "Acosmism or Weak Individuals?" and Newlands, "Hegel's Idealist Reading of Spinoza" and "More Recent Idealist Readings of Spinoza.".

I think we can see the beginnings of Spinoza's answer by looking at his claims about metaphysical perfection. To preview what we will find: Spinoza thinks metaphysical perfection involves maximizing parsimony at the fundamental level and plenitude at the derivative level. The One *and* the Many via the Many *in* the One. Spinoza treats metaphysical perfection as explanatory as well. It is *because* perfection involves one thing instantiating a multiplicity of states that God, the most perfect being, does this to the greatest possible degree: one thing with infinitely diverse states. That might sound teleological or normative, but it need not be read so strongly. God's perfection explains the plenitude of divine states in the sense in which God's essence explains God's existence, for Spinoza.

To see this, consider first a passage from the first Appendix, which follows Spinoza's previously cited claim that the true perfection of things is to be judged solely from their "nature and power," i.e., what they are like and what they do. He then imagines an objection, a non-moral version of the problem of evil:

> But to those who ask 'why God did not create all men so that they would be governed [only] by the command of reason?' I answer only 'because he did not lack material to create all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest'; or, to speak more properly, 'because the laws of his nature have been so ample [*amplae*] that they sufficed for producing all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect' (as I have demonstrated in Ip16)" (E1App; G II/83).

In this passage, Spinoza points to the richness, the fullness of God's nature to explain mode plenitude, which ranges from "the highest degree of perfection to the lowest." In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza is even more explicit: "But God's true perfection is that he gives all things their essence, from the least to the greatest; or to put it better, he has everything perfect in himself" (*KV* I 6; G I/43).

Spinoza's appeal to a plentiful cascade of things, from the least to the greatest, echoes the sort of "Great Chain of Being" image found throughout much of Western philosophy. Spinoza emphasizes two somewhat more distinctive points in these passages. First, the source

of the plentiful range of more and less perfect things is found in God's metaphysically perfect nature and not in some extrinsic ideal or moral core. As Spinoza claims a bit earlier in the *Ethics*, ontological diversity follows from God's perfection and not from, say, a free and loving divine choice: "From the preceding it clearly follows that things have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature" (E1p33s2, G II/74, my emphasis).[23]

Second, and much more controversially, Spinoza emphasizes that the plentiful diversity that follows from God's nature resides *within God*. God, as the *ens perfectissimum*, contains "everything perfect in himself." Spinoza makes a similar claim in *TTP*: "all perfections are contained in [God]" (TTP Ch. 6, art. 19, G III/93). God's perfection explains not only the plentiful structure of the world, but also why God generates that richness wholly *internally*, as it were. Put into the context of the rest of Spinoza's ontology, Spinoza thinks *mode* plenitude, as opposed to *finite substance* plenitude, follows from God or Nature's metaphysical perfection. It follows that a world of one substance containing infinite richness in itself is more perfect than a world of one divine substance that brings about equally diverse but more ontologically independent things. Metaphysical perfection, in other words, is greatest just in case a single thing contains maximal diversity.

I think something like this reasoning is behind Spinoza's better-known defenses of attribute and mode plenitude in the *Ethics*. Spinoza writes, as though it were self-evident, "The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it" (E1p9). Given Spinoza's claim that reality and perfection are interchangeable (E2d6), Spinoza's principle in E1p9 is that the more perfect an individual thing is, the more attributes it has. In light of

[23] See also KV I 4; TTP Ch. 4 art. 10, G III/65 and Ch. 6 art. 3, G III/82-3.

Spinoza's theory of attributes, an equivalent principle is that the more perfect an individual thing is, the more fundamental ways there are by which it can be expressed or conceived.

In a rich letter to John Hudde, Spinoza even claims that God's perfection "demands" attribute plenitude: "God's nature demands all that which perfectly expresses being, otherwise his nature would be determinate and deficient" (Ep36, G IV/185).[24] This helps us understand Spinoza's claim in E1p14 that "God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attribute which expresses an essence of substance can be denied" (E1p14d; G II/56, my emphasis). Why *can't* any attribute be denied of God? Because to do that would be to ascribe to God imperfection, to conceive of God as "deficient," which presumably would be to exhibit a misunderstanding about the nature of the *ens perfectissimum*. God's perfection, in other words, entails and explains attribute plenitude.[25]

Spinoza makes a strikingly similar appeal to defend mode plenitude: "the intellect…infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, that is, the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves" (E1p16d). In other words, the more perfection the essence of a thing involves, the more modes it will contain. That is, the degree of a thing's perfection also corresponds to the range of modifications it can undergo. This is reminiscent of Spinoza's claim that "the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual" (E2p13sL7s).

More generally, if a thing were maximally perfect, it would have plentifully many attributes and modes.[26] Put another way, the plenitude in God follows from God's perfection.

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[24] Cited from the Shirley translation. It is clear from the context of the letter that by "that which perfectly expresses being" Spinoza means attributes and that the sense of "demand" is non-normative, meaning something like "necessarily involves" (see also E1p11d).

[25] Spinoza reasons in this vein in *KV* as well (see *KV* I 2; G I/23). For an interesting discussion of this early text that is closely aligned with my interpretation here, see John Brandau, "Degrees of Essence and Perfection in Spinoza."

[26] This comparative claim also explains some of Spinoza's claims about improvement in the *Ethics*: a finite thing's becoming more perfect involves its acquiring more states (see especially E3p12 and E5p38-40).

"I have shown that all things proceed by a certain eternal necessity of nature, and with the greatest perfection" (E1App; G II/80). True metaphysical perfection involves the existence of a single thing somehow containing infinitely many things, combining identity at the fundamental level and vast diversity at the derivative. Here, I believe, we see why Spinoza thought his own account of God or Nature most accurately captured God's maximal perfection.

Of course, it remains an open question whether Spinoza actually *can* provide an account of God's nature that satisfies these competing demands of parsimony and plenitude in a consistent manner. That, however, is a story for another occasion.[27] More immediately pressing is a concern about this account of metaphysical perfection. Why think perfection involves balancing or even maximizing both parsimony and plenitude in the first place? Is Spinoza's criteria of perfection at least as arbitrary and idiosyncratic as it is elucidating and convincing?

3. The One and The Many: Leibniz and Schaffer

Appealing to metaphysical perfection to help justify one's ontological commitments may have the air of the outmoded or the quixotic, but it is not as idiosyncratic as it might initially seem. My defense of Spinoza on this point will be extremely limited: *if* Spinoza relies on bad reasoning here, then at least he isn't alone in doing so. I will defend this modest claim by pointing to similar reasoning by another pair of metaphysicians, one from Spinoza's time and one from our own. Unlike Spinoza, they also offer some independent considerations in favor of such a structural account, though as we will see, their reasons are far from decisive.

I claimed in the previous section that Spinoza understood perfection to be a structural feature of things, a measurement of diversity that nonetheless rested on an underlying identity.

[27] For the full version, see Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza*.

So put, this account of metaphysical perfection closely resembles that of another famous seventeenth century rationalist: Leibniz.[28] Although the details vary across his corpus, Leibniz frequently characterizes metaphysical perfection in similar structural terms, sometimes describing it as "harmony." (From here on, I will use "metaphysical perfection" and "harmony" interchangeably for Leibniz.[29])

In his early writings, Leibniz's account of harmony is sometimes quite stark. For example, in his *Confessio Philosophi*, he defines harmony as "similarity in variety, that is, diversity compensated by identity" (CP 29).[30] As is his wont, Leibniz frames such metaphysical relations in both mathematical and aesthetic terms:

> Harmony and discord consist in the ratio of identity to diversity, for harmony is unity in multiplicity, and it is the greatest in the case where it is a unity of the greatest number of things disordered in appearance and reduced, unexpectedly, by some wonderful ratio to the greatest symmetry (CP 43–5).

According to these passages, harmony is the ratio of *identity* to *diversity*. Of course, since identity is all or nothing, one term in the calculation of harmony does not admit of degrees at all, a point Leibniz makes in a very early passage: "Harmony is greater when diversity is greater, which is nonetheless reduced to identity. (For there cannot be degrees in identity, but in variety.)"[31] Perhaps for this reason, Leibniz sometimes loosens the criteria for harmony, appealing to "unity" or "simplicity" or "similarity" rather than identity as the relevant term.

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[28] Malebranche also springs to mind (cf. *TNG* I.18), but he is less explicit than Leibniz. Still, that leading 17th century rationalists converge on this point is noteworthy, as is Kant's aforementioned rejection of this "harmony in one" account of perfection.

[29] Admittedly, Leibniz uses "harmony" in many different ways and contexts. The sort of Leibnizian harmony I focus on is the one he uses in his early writings to describe the contours of metaphysical perfection. As one might expect, there has been a great deal of secondary discussion on Leibniz's notion(s) of perfection, most of which focuses on later, more nomologically-based forms that I will set aside here for reasons that will become clear.

[30] For identical formulations made roughly around the same time, see also Ak VI.ii.283, L 150 and several passages in *Elements of Natural Law* (esp. Ak VI.i.484. At Ak VI.i.477, he reverses the ordering of *identity* and *diversity*; and at Ak VI.i.479, he refers to diversity that is "reduced to identity"). For an appeal to *similarity*, see Ak II.i.164; for *simplicity*, see DSR 113.

[31] Ak VI.i.479; I have cited Strickland's translation (Strickland, *Leibniz Reinterpreted,* 96), but see also Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics,* 214.

Even so, identity is the limit case of unity and similarity, such that perfection or harmony would be highest if identity was combined in the right way with maximal diversity.

Although Leibniz most often discusses the harmony or perfection of collections of things, he also applies the measure to individuals. (In fact, if numerical identity is one of the variables, harmony could *only* be a feature of individuals!) As always, at the top of Leibniz's scale is God, the *ens perfectissimum*, the most harmonious individual:

> Perfection is the degree or quantity of reality. Hence the most perfect thing is that which has the highest degree of reality. That is, the being that contains as much reality, qualities, and powers as is possible to be together in one subject. Hence God is understood to have no limits of presence, duration, power, knowledge, operations and to possess as much [of these qualities] as one thing can possess. Harmony is unity in variety (Ak VI.iv.1358).[32]

This is congruent with how Leibniz frequently defines God during this period, as "the subject of all compatible forms" (i.e., the subject of all compatible simple, positive, and absolute attributes, qualities, or perfections).[33] In short, for Leibniz, God is the most perfect in virtue of containing the most features that can be exemplified "together in one subject." Spinoza could not have said it better himself.

Although God is the most harmonious individual, Leibniz thinks finite individuals and systems of individuals instantiate varying degrees of metaphysical perfection, according to the extent to which they too are structured in harmonious ways. That is, things and systems of things are more or less perfect depending on how well they combine unity and diversity, and Leibniz sometimes claims that it is precisely this characteristic that God evaluates when deciding which world to create. Looking to bring about the best imitation of God's own

[32] The editors give this text an uncertain dating of 1677-78.
[33] For but a few examples, see DSR 69, 79, 81, 101.

perfect and harmonious nature, God selects the most perfect – most harmonious – possible world to create.[34]

But God is hardly alone in utilizing this measurement of metaphysical perfection, according to Leibniz. Leibniz claims that we too value this kind of structured perfection, a point Leibniz makes using everyday examples. Musicians, Leibniz claims, strive to strike an optimal balance between theme and variation.[35] In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz gives numerous such examples:

> We can say that someone who behaves perfectly is like an expert geometer who knows how to find the best construction for a problem; or like a good architect who utilizes the location and the ground for his building in the most advantageous way, leaving nothing discordant, or which doesn't have the beauty of which it is capable; or like a good head of a household, who manages his property in such a way that there is no ground left uncultivated or barren; or like a clever stage-manager who produces his effect by the least awkward means that could be found; or like a learned author, who gets the most reality into the least space he can (DM 5, AG 38).

Leibniz's point is that in general terms and in everyday ways, our preferences often track how well diversity and unity are combined in this one-to-many way. An updated, but still sufficiently hand-wavy example would be our widespread admiration of set theory, which elegantly uses a few basic axioms to derive numerous, powerful theorems. That does not amount to a *proof* of much, but it does suggest that the appeal of harmony or metaphysical perfection is not idiosyncratic to a few wild-eyed 17th century rationalists.

In fact, although the terminology and examples are quite different, in recent work Jonathan Schaffer has tried to make a case for positing ontological structures on the basis of fidelity to something like this structural account of metaphysical perfection. Of course, given

[34] For example, see Ak VI.iv.1362. One might well wonder whether and how Leibniz's God takes other forms of perfection, such as physical and moral perfection (i.e., the happiness and virtue of minds), into account when deciding which world to create. One more Spinoza-friendly reductive possibility with at least some textual support in Leibniz is that *physical perfection* is just a measurement of "delighting in harmony," i.e., the degree to which a mind stands in a certain intellectual and affective relation to metaphysical perfection; *moral perfection* is just a measurement of "willing in favor of harmony," i.e., the degree to which a mind stands in a certain volitional relation to metaphysical perfection.

[35] Ak VI.i.484-5; Ak VI.iv.1359.

Schaffer's role in reviving interest in monism in contemporary metaphysics, it may be unsurprising that he again proves himself an ally of Spinoza here. But still, Schaffer's advocacy of a similar principle on very different grounds is instructive, and it can be presented free of many of Spinoza's more distinctive claims.

Schaffer describes this methodological preference in metaphysics in terms of a "Bang for the Buck" principle: "What one ought to have is the strongest theory (generating the most derivative entities) on the simplest basis (from the fewest substances)."[36] Notice how Schaffer explicitly applies the principle to ontology itself: we rationally ought to prefer – perhaps *ceteris paribus* – theories whose ontologies combine a very sparse number of substances with a very plentiful range of derivative entities. By this criterion, it is hard to imagine getting a bigger "Bang for the Buck" than what we get with Spinoza, assuming he can pull it off.

As Leibniz did, Schaffer motivates his principle in metaphysics by appealing to its acceptability in other domains. In particular, Schaffer points out that we already accept something like this preference in the conceptual realm. We prefer theories with few but powerful conceptual primitives: primitives that enable the construction of new and useful derivative concepts. Neither measure alone – the number of primitives or the number of definable, useful concepts – is sufficient to capture the choice-worthiness of a theory's conceptual economy. Put positively, an ideal conceptual economy would involve a single conceptual primitive, in terms of which maximally many useful concepts could be defined.

Schaffer thinks it is at least "defeasibly reasonable" to expect that the same measures for conceptual economy apply in the ontological realm.[37] Thus we should prefer – perhaps *ceteris paribus* – ontological accounts that strike more favorable balances between the numbers of fundamental and derivative entities they posit. Hence, an ideal ontological

[36] Schaffer, "On What Grounds What," 361; see also "Why the World Has Parts," 88.
[37] Schaffer, "What Not to Multiply Without Necessity," 6.

economy would involve a single fundamental entity that generates maximally many (useful) derivative entities. The Many in or through the One again.

Whereas Leibniz appealed to geometrical and craftsman metaphors to illustrate this min-max principle, Schaffer offers a more eco-friendly image:

> *Ontological Bang for the Buck*: Optimally balance minimization of fundamental entities with maximization of derivative entities (especially useful ones).
> Derivative entities are part of what makes a package of fundamental entities fruitful. They show that these fundamental entities can be used to produce something.[38]

He continues the metaphor, tightly linking the conceptual and ontological versions:

> Overall, bang-for-the-buck methodology across the ontological and conceptual sides of the ledger recommends a sparse *restrictivist* view of the basis (both the primitive concepts and the fundamental entities) coupled with an abundant *permissivist* view of the superstructure (both the defined concepts and the derivative entities). In place of desert landscapes, I suggest that one cultivates a taste for fruitful orchards, and seek theories whose slender trunks still have the strength to support branching and blossoming canopies.[39]

At this point in the paper, Schaffer passes over into poetry and begins quoting Walt Whitman. Some will see this as a telling nod to the aesthetic judgment underlying all these accounts of perfection or harmony: beauty, be it in theories or in the world itself, involves an optimal few-to-great balance between the supports and the supported.[40] Leibniz sometimes claims that the explanation runs in the other direction: judgments about perfection actually underlie aesthetic appreciations, not vice versa.[41] Either way, for those attracted to Schaffer's orchards, it would be worth considering just how much bang for the ontological buck Spinoza's system offers.

At the same time, we might wonder about the cogency of Schaffer's case. Even if we focus exclusively on theoretical economy, Schaffer's inference from what holds at the conceptual level to what holds at the ontological level should give us pause. For old-fashioned

[38] Schaffer, "What Not to Multiply Without Necessity," 9, my emphases.
[39] Schaffer, "What Not to Multiple Without Necessity," 10.
[40] Certainly Schaffer is happy to invoke aesthetic properties here: "Whether classical mereology is ultimately to be accepted or not is a further question, but even its detractors ought to admit that it is a beautiful bit of machinery" (Schaffer, "What not to Multiply Without Necessity," 9).
[41] See the illuminating discussion of this point in Strickland, *Leibniz Reinterpreted*, 104-5.

rationalists like Spinoza and Leibniz, there's a grand backstory involving God that, if true, might give us a reason to expect our conceptual preferences to be reliable guides for our ontological preferences. But absent such a grand backstory, it is not clear what the case for this connection would look like.

Just as Spinoza might join Leibniz in demanding a more rationalist-friendly framework for Schaffer's theory preference account, Spinoza might in turn align with Schaffer to criticize Leibniz's more pluralistic ontology on grounds that substance monism provides a more metaphysically perfect and divine-worthy landscape.[42] To get a brief feel for this exchange, we should note that Leibniz sometimes argues that mental substances are always more harmonious and more perfect individuals than non-mental substances. The reason is that that minds (or mind-like things capable of representation) exhibit the one-in-many structure of metaphysical perfection: "However, thinking is also a certain reality, and [it is] so much greater because, by thinking, things are multiplied in a way, for individual minds contain, in some manner, the representation of the whole world."[43] Indeed, insofar as everything can be the object of thought, a single mind plus all possible representational states would be a perfect example of structural harmony: one thing, infinitely many diverse states.[44]

In fact, the imagined Spinozist pushes, such an individual would be so metaphysically perfect that it is hard to see how adding any additional minds to the world would result in anything other than a net decrease in the world's harmony. It is true that adding additional perceivers would result in an increase in numerical richness, but at a staggering cost to identity (namely, maximally high for each distinct perceiver added!). To use Schaffer's

[42] I discuss this much more fully in Newlands, "From Theism to Idealism to Monism: A Leibnizian Road Not Taken" (ms).
[43] Ak VI.iv.1359-60; see also DM 5, AG 38.
[44] Here is another conversation point with Schaffer, who focuses solely on the numbers issue: preferences for theoretical economy based on numbers of fundamental and derivative entities. But Leibniz thinks these considerations should also inform our theory selection with respect to the *kinds* of entities one posits at the fundamental level.

metaphor, why would God create a whole orchard of orange trees when God could instead create a single, super orange tree, especially if it contained as many oranges (i.e., mental states) as the grove would have held?

Indeed, in light of Leibniz's claim that *God* is the maximally perfect being that contains all possible representations,[45] Spinoza might object that a world containing *any* created substances at all would be a less metaphysically perfect world than the monist's world in which God creates nothing external. After all, according to Leibniz himself, creation introduces no additional diversity among the features of such a world, since God already possesses, in some form, every attribute of every possible creature.[46] Hence, the Spinozistic challenge to Leibniz runs, *in what structural feature lies the deficiency of the monist's world compared with any other possible world*? In reply, Leibniz might appeal to goods other than purely metaphysical perfection to explain God's choice to create finite substances, but that reply concedes the present point to Spinoza and shifts the debate to the adequacy of these purely structural accounts of perfection.

At any rate, that is at least one way Spinoza might begin to wield his account of perfection to put monistic pressure on his fellow rationalists. I do not know how seriously Leibniz took this particular Spinozistic threat, but as time went on, Leibniz began to emphasize other, weaker kinds of unity, such as *nomological* or *expressive* unity, rather than *identity* or *simplicity*, as one of the two criteria for metaphysical perfection. From Spinoza's perspective, it is difficult to see this shift as anything other than a concession, however unintentional. If we cannot have the One, then perhaps we need to settle for some kind of

[45] This includes limited representations, according to Leibniz; see DM 14, AG 47. For a contemporary discussion of this issue, see Zagzebski, "Omnisubjectivity."
[46] For example, see Ak 6.4.2366. Although he surely did not intend anything quite so strong, Leibniz sometimes even describes God as the "harmony of things" (Ak VI.i.499; VI.ii.131; VI.iii.129).

organized configuration of the Many. But the Leibnizian should admit that this diminishment of metaphysical perfection is at least one cost the Spinozist need not pay.[47]

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