

POETIC INTUITION

SPINOZA AND GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

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As one commentator notes, Spinoza's conception of "the third kind of knowledge"—*intuition*, has been "regarded as exceptionally obscure. Some writers regard it as a kind of mystic vision; others regard it as simply unintelligible."¹ For Spinoza, the first kind of knowledge, which he calls "imagination," is a kind of sense-experience of particulars; the second kind, which he calls "understanding," involves the rational grasp of universals, and the third, in his words, "proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of some of the attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things."² In this essay I will attempt to show, through an explication of Spinoza's concept of intuition, how a prime example of intuition can be found in the art of poetry. More specifically, I will examine resonances between the work of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889) and Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) by exploring the ways in which Hopkins' poetry can work as both (1) an exemplar of poetry qua Spinozistic intuition, and (2) an intuition-based access to Spinoza's thought. The upshot of this essay, then, is that there is a kind of knowledge, and by implication a kind of education (through which to acquire that knowledge) which—even for a philosopher as mathematically rigorous as Spinoza—may require recourse to the art of poetry.

Spinoza's Third Knowledge

I begin with a close inspection of Spinoza's definition of the third kind of knowledge, considering each concept in the definition mentioned above individually in the order in which it appears in the definition. It is as follows: intuition is that which "*proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of some of the attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of*

things." First of all, an idea for Spinoza denotes not a mental representation or the content of such a representation, but "an action of the mind . . . involving judgment."³ By an adequate idea, in turn, Spinoza understands "an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties, or the extrinsic denominations, of a true idea" (e2d4). Adequacy, then, could be paraphrased as truth minus correspondence, or truth which remains at the level of generality without any relation to a concrete object. In other words, adequacy for Spinoza is determined by whether our ideas about something are generally accurate, such as the abstract truths of mathematics. Regarding the second concept in Spinoza's definition of intuition, namely, essence, he writes the following:

I say that there belongs to the essence of a thing, that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived, and conversely that which can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing. (e2d2)

In other words, a being's essence is that which is distinctive of that type of being and thereby defines it. Spinoza's defines the "actual essence" of a thing (i.e., a thing's essence as we conceive it) as "the endeavor to persevere in its own being," condensed in the word "*conatus*" (e3p7). And the "formal" of "formal essence" in Spinoza's above definition, according to Parkinson, "means what would now be called 'real.' . . . To talk of the formal essence of X is to talk of X itself" (Parkinson 321).

The third concept in Spinoza's definition of intuition, finally, is an attribute, defined as "that which intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence" (e1d4). God and substance,

for Spinoza, are the same, and thus human beings for him can only perceive two of God/substance's infinite attributes—thought and extension (e1p15s). The reference to “some of the attributes of God” in the definition of intuition can thus only refer to thought and extension.

I have so far explicated only the first part of that definition. Intuition proceeds *from* “an adequate idea of the formal essence of some of the attributes of God” and *to* “an adequate knowledge of the essence of things.” I have observed that adequate knowledge means the same thing as true knowledge, but without reference to the existing entity that is known. And I have established that the essence of a thing for Spinoza is its *conatus*, its endeavor to persist in its being. As for the last phrase, “things” for Spinoza are what he terms “finite modes” (Parkinson 322).

Modes, in general, are “affections of substance, or, that which is in something else, through which it is also conceived” (e1d5). They are modifications of substance by being modifications of the attributes of substance such as thought and extension. And finite modes—particular things—“are nothing other than the affections, i.e., the modes, of the attributes of God, by which the attributes of God are expressed in a certain and determinate way” (e1p25c). For example, the attribute of extension is one way in which the intellect perceives the essence of substance, and a particular human body is simply one (finite) mode of extension.

Having considered each of the concepts in the definition of intuition individually, I can now paraphrase it in its entirety as follows: one arrives at a rationally correct conception of the *conatus* of a thing (i.e., a finite mode) by means of a rationally correct conception of thought or extension. Put differently, if one really understands thought and/or extension in principle, one can thereby infer the essence of a particular thing. That is, if one understands that thought and extension are the intellect's perception of the essence of God/substance, then one can understand that particular things are conceived by human beings *in terms of* or *by means of* thought and extension. One must know what extension is in order to understand a particular extended thing, and one must know

what thought is to understand a particular mental thing.

I will now “zoom out” a bit, to flesh out the broader context in which Spinoza deploys this concept of intuition. Spinoza claims that intuition, like understanding, “is necessarily true,” and “teaches us to distinguish between the true and the false” (e2p41). He compares intuition to the intuitive grasp of a mathematical formula by considering the relationship among specific numbers plugged into the formula, as opposed to calculating the problem using variables. Thus, intuition for Spinoza seems to involve universals grasped through particulars, despite the fact that my paraphrases of the definition seem to imply that it is particulars that are grasped through universals—finite modes perceived through the attributes of thought or extension—and not the other way around.

Spinoza does provide a few other scattered clues for understanding his concept of intuition. He describes it as being especially powerful in overcoming the negative effects of the emotions and as inspiring the intellectual love of God as eternal and infinite (e5p20s). Further, he claims that to “understand things by the third kind of knowledge” is the “highest endeavor of the mind, and its highest virtue,” (e5p25) because “the more we understand things in this way [in their essence, i.e., reality] the more . . . we understand God” (e5p25d). This understanding is described as the mind's “power” and “virtue” and “nature”—all of which are equivalent terms for Spinoza. And the more things the mind grasps in this way, the more it wants to grasp things in this way. It is in this pursuit, claims Spinoza, that the mind finds its greatest peace (e5p26–27). Also worth noting, the mind itself is regarded as the cause of the third kind of knowledge (e5p31d).

In light of these observations, one possible understanding of intuition is that it consists in a combination of the specificity and concreteness of the first kind of knowledge with the accuracy and generality of the second kind of knowledge. In other words, the universal and the particular are understood through each other. Either thought or extension is grasped through the action of a specific idea. Conversely, a specific idea

is enacted by grasping the nature of thought or extension in itself. At any rate, what seems central for intuition is that the relationship between generality and specificity is affirmed. This conclusion would also seem supported by Deleuze's "figure" for the third kind of knowledge, namely "a triangle that joins together the adequate ideas of ourselves, of God, and of other things" (Deleuze 82).

Spinoza's Third Knowledge as Poetry

Nothing, arguably, more effectively affirms the generality-specificity relationship than language, which is also the conceptual bridge between intuition and poetry. Via its connection to thinking, language is an attribute of thought; on the other hand, and via its connection to speech, language is manifested as extension. Language is thus distinctly capable of affirming, at an intuitive level, Spinoza's central claim that thought and extension are merely two different ways of representing the same substance. Furthermore, whenever language is used to denote particulars, it brings its nature as a universal medium to bear on those particulars, and thus affirms the resonance between generality (that is, rationality) and specificity (that is, phenomena in the world).

The art of poetry, in turn, is arguably the most effective genre for this evoking of generality through particulars, insofar as it both utilizes language to describe particular situations, thoughts, feelings, observations, etc., and also manifests language as language. Poetry, in other words, foregrounds language's capacities for affirming the general-specific relationship at the same time as it refers to the phenomena in the world named by the language of the poem. In thinking about poetry, perhaps while reading silently, one is made aware not only of what the poem is describing about the world, but also of the activity of the attribute of thought, of thought taking place. And in scanning poetry with one's eyes, similarly, one is aware not only of how the words match up with things in the world, but also of language as itself an extended thing made of ink, a physical spread of words on a page. Similarly, when one reads poetry aloud, one is made aware not only of the things in the world that the sounds evoke, but also

of language as itself a physically extended phenomenon, namely sound waves spun from vibrating vocal cords and inhabiting the surrounding air.

Spinoza's own limited use of poetry in the *Ethics* is also interesting with regard to its exemplification of his concept of intuition. In dealing with the problem of "weakness of will," for example, Spinoza in three separate places (e3p2s; e4 Preface; e4p17s) "refers to Ovid's lines, 'I see and approve the better; I follow the worse'." According to Parkinson, Spinoza's solution for how to overcome this weakness of will

involves the third kind of knowledge. Such knowledge (cf. Section 8) is not universal, but is of particular things, in the sense that we grasp the rule in the particular instance. If we had such knowledge, it would "affect our mind" (e5p36s) with such power that our passion would be overcome. (Parkinson 47)

This intense "power" to "affect our mind" is of course characteristic of poetry as well, and is likely part of the reason Spinoza chose to appropriate the line from Ovid three times in illustrating his understanding of "weakness of will."

Moving beyond Spinoza's specific invocation of Ovid to the world of poetry in general, there are almost as many examples of how poetry might function as a type of the third kind of knowledge as there are poets or even poems. But the poet that I find singularly illuminating in this regard is Gerard Manley Hopkins, as illustrated in the following first stanza of his well-known sonnet "Carrion Comfort":

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast
on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last
strands of man
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not
choose not to be.⁴

In these lines, one finds a powerful existential weariness and a counter-force of rugged tenacity fighting to overcome that despair. The poem is thus both a description of these emotions and an expression of the speaker's state of being; it is not

a purely conceptual explanation of despair and resistance, nor is it merely an immediate sensory-experience of them—instead, it is somehow neither and/or both. On the one hand, the words on the page are sensory information for our eyes, and thus subject to the process of *imagination*; on the other hand, there is a conceptual element in the lines that relates to the *understanding*. The poem intertwines both of these aspects, revealing a connection between the essence/conatus of the reader, the speaker of the poem, the author of the poem, and, by implication human beings in general. Cumulatively, these beings represent two of the three angles of Deleuze's aforementioned triangular figure for intuition (namely, ourselves and other things). For the third angle of that triangle (namely, God), I turn to the second stanza of this same poem:

But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou
rude on me
Thy wring-earth right foot rock? lay a lionlimb
against me? Scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised
bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me fran-
tic to avoid thee and
flee?

The “O thou terrible” addressed in the first line refers of course to God, completing the triadic network of reference among the essence of God and the list of essences elaborated above. In other words, one perceives intuitively, through the poem, something about the relationship of human beings, the world, and God. And in this way, the poem could be described as performing the kind of knowledge that Spinoza calls “intuition.”

Hopkins' Knowledge

It is not only Hopkins' poetry, however, that resonates with Spinoza's concept of intuition, but also his theoretical writings on poetry, and in particular his three concepts of inscape, instress, and sprung rhythm, all of which have distinct parallels in Spinoza's philosophy. Hopkins never clearly and comprehensively articulated his un-

derstanding of either inscape or instress, but a compilation of his notes, journal entries, and letters (along with the abundant examples of these two elements in his poems) provides a general picture of what he meant by them. According to the literary critic J. R. Watson, “The first example of the use of the words ‘inscape’ and ‘instress’ in Hopkins' writings comes in his notes, dated, 1868, on the Greek philosopher Parmenides”:

His great text, which he repeats with religious conviction, is that Being is and Not-being is not—which perhaps one can say, a little over-defining his meaning, means that all things are upheld by instress and are meaningless without it. . . . His feeling for instress, for the flush and foredrawn, and for inscape is most striking.⁵

First of all, it is important to note Hopkins' propensity for experimentation with diction, especially his love of neologisms, which include “heavengravel,” “wolfsnow,” “deathgush,” “gaygear,” and “earl-stars.” Hopkins also adopted various dialect words from Welsh and other linguistic sources, including “voel,” which means “hill”; “degged,” meaning “sprinkled”; and “fashed,” for “troubled.” Additionally, Hopkins sought out “old-fashioned or obsolete” English words such as “sillion,” meaning “furrow,” and “rivelled,” meaning “wrinkled,” the last of which he took from *The Tempest*, by Shakespeare, a fellow poet “whose coinages Hopkins admired greatly” (Watson 39–44).

Watson understands inscape for Hopkins as “the essence or substance of the thing which prevents it from changing into something else, holds it as it is” (32). Watson also links inscape to the influence on Hopkins of the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, whose focus was on what he called the *haecceitas*, or this-ness, or quiddity of a thing in its radical singularity. Inscap, writes Watson, “is the ‘within-scape’ of something, its inner shape” (34). In this way, inscape can be understood as a sort of radical interiorizing of landscape, and suggests that there is a particular internal landscape proper to each being as its essence.

These spatial/geographical aspects of inscape noted in Watson suggest an affinity with Deleuze's analysis of Spinoza's thought as involving a “plane of immanence,” “ethology,” and

a geometrical model of “*longitude and latitude*” (Deleuze 127). Deleuze finds in Spinoza’s philosophy a radical orientation toward univocal extension, a conception of a singular plane of existence in which all bodies (human, animal, mental, mathematical, etc.) are extended and find their habitats. Inscap, in other words, with its ties to landscapes and to an understanding of things as consisting of interiorized landscapes, seems to belong among the concepts of what the later Deleuze conceives as “geophilosophy.”

One can easily find certain parallels between Hopkins’ inscap and Spinoza’s conception of essence, especially since each particular thing in the world for Spinoza is further composed of an infinite array of bodies. A body is defined by Spinoza as “a mode which expresses in a certain and determinate way the essence of God, insofar as he is considered an extended thing” (e2d1). For example, the human body is a mode of the attribute of extension, and is a body composed of organs, which are also bodies, which are composed of tissues, cells, atoms, etc., all of which are bodies as well. Each body consists of both a conglomeration of other bodies that are all affected in similar ways, and also of groups of such conglomerations, each of which is affected in similar ways. What defines the essence of each thing—each distribution of bodies—is its affectability.

The liver, for example, is formed by a vast number of modes, all of which share certain kinds of affectability, such as the ability of each of the cells of the liver to be nourished by the blood, and to purify the blood of various toxins. It is just these common affectabilities that make the cells of the liver into the liver. Likewise, the liver is part of a community of other organs in the human body that have in common the ability to be affected (as a human body) by various things. Similarly, the essence of a thing for Hopkins—its inscap—can be thought of as a map of essential qualities, i.e., of the essential ways that something can affect and be affected by other things. In this case, the inscap might take the form of an anatomical drawing of the liver.

One could argue, however, that this is only one possible interpretation of Hopkins’ rather

vague sense of essence expressed by inscap. Might not defining a thing’s essence in terms of what functions it can perform, for example, or in terms of what physiological traits it has, or in terms of its genetic background, be less suited to inscap than a Spinozistic conception based on affectability? The following, brief analysis of instress should help clarify this question.

Instress is often described by Hopkins in conjunction with inscap (as in my first quote from Hopkins above). Instress, however, seems more commonsensical than inscap in its usage, especially since Hopkins often uses the word *stress* as a paraphrase for instress. In the quote above from Hopkins’ notes on Parmenides, for example, one reads first about “the depth of an instress” and then, only two sentences later, of a “stem of stress between us and things.” According to Watson, instress is “the ‘within-stress’ of a thing, the force or stress that comes from within something and which is felt by the beholder as ‘stressing’ it, giving it its stress from within itself. Instress is a force and is *felt*” (34).

Conjoining Watson’s analyses of inscap and instress, one observes that for him the two are “two related qualities” that are “closely connected (a) with the world of physical things, and, indeed, mental and spiritual things too (inscap) and (b) with our perception of the external world and the forces within it (instress)” (31–32). Watson repeats two pages later that “inscap is closely related to instress,” and that “if the inscap holds a thing, then it is the instress of the thing which is felt” (34).

Each of these observations seems to approach, but not accomplish, an interpretive move uniting the two concepts in a more intimate way. Watson’s formula, and perhaps Hopkins’ intended formula as well, seems to be the following: inscap = essence of thing, and instress = energy of thing; or, inscap = thing, and instress = energy. Is it not also possible, however, that this description of the relationship between inscap and instress is burdened by an unacknowledged metaphysical commitment, and a commitment without which the texts of the poems themselves are still capable of functioning? More specifically, does Watson’s understanding of inscap

POETIC INTUITION

and instress rely on a naïve subject-object duality, assuming a transcendent subjectivity encountering alien objects? If so, what possibilities might be created by considering an alternative to this particular metaphysical picture?

More specifically, what if one were to think of an inscape—following Deleuze’s understanding of Spinoza as working in a “common plane of immanence”—as *nothing other than the manifestation of its instress?* (122) The Norton Anthology’s essay on Hopkins seems to support this view, in that it defines *instress* as simply a more precise term for “liveliness,” describing it as “the power that holds inscape together, like the force that binds the atom.” Borrowing further conceptualization from physics, one might frame the question as follows: what if matter (essence, inscape) is nothing but a certain form of activity or energy (force, instress)?

Having thus briefly interrogated inscape and instress, I now turn, finally, to Hopkins’ concept of “Sprung Rhythm,” which he discusses in the “Author’s Preface” to *Poems* (1918).⁶ Sprung Rhythm is a technique in prosody derived from the application to traditional English metrical forms (such as iambic pentameter) of the technique Hopkins calls “counterpoint.” In counterpoint, similar to the jazz technique of syncopation, the positions of the stressed syllable(s) and the unstressed syllable(s) are switched, producing a reversing or counter effect to the dominant metrical pattern. When “counterpoint is used throughout [the poem],” Hopkins writes, “since one only of the counter rhythms [Sprung Rhythm] is actually heard, the other [conventional rhythm] is really destroyed or cannot come to exist, and what is written is one rhythm only and probably Sprung Rhythm” (7). The resulting metrical form is as follows: one to four metrical feet, each of which begins with a stressed syllable followed by only unstressed syllables. This flexible structure gives the poet considerable freedom with regard to line composition.

The most important aspect of sprung rhythm for the purposes of the present essay is its focus on strength and power over against more traditional English metrical patterns. Watson notes in his analysis that Hopkins considered sprung

rhythm to be “stronger and more natural than the customary metre of poetry, which counts an equal number of feet and syllables” (34). Watson then quotes a letter in which Hopkins poses the following question: “why, if it is forcible in prose to say ‘lashed rod’, am I obliged to weaken this in verse, which ought to be stronger, not weaker, into ‘lashed birch-rod’ or something?”⁷ Watson also notes that it was crucial for Hopkins that “the poet is always counterpointing” the common rhythms and meters underneath his sprung rhythm, meaning that sprung rhythm, despite its flexibility, is not in fact a form of free verse, but a careful structure built on a hidden foundation or abyss of counterpointed regular meter.

Strength and power are also crucial to Spinoza’s entire philosophy, particularly his ethics and psychology. “By virtue and power [or *conatus*],” Spinoza writes, “I understand the same; that is . . . virtue, in so far as it is related to man, is the very essence, i.e., the nature, of man” (e4d8). I have already noted that *conatus* is the essence of human being, to which I now append that the increase in power of acting/existing is what constitutes positive human emotion, such as joy. And a decrease in power is experienced as negative emotion, such as sadness (e3d3; e3p58; de1–3). Similarly, what is good for something is that which increases its power of acting, and what is bad for something is that which decreases its power of acting (e4d1–2, 8). These claims are the foundation for what might be broadly construed as Spinoza’s “naturalistic ethics.”

The major affinity then, between Spinoza’s ethics and psychology and Hopkins’ Sprung Rhythm, is that both opt for a more vigorously affirmative alternative in the face of something more passive. Spinoza rejects the good-evil duality of what Nietzsche would call the “slave” character of Judeo-Christian morality in favor of a “noble” ethics based on one’s power of acting, and Hopkins rejects traditional English meter for a more condensed and percussive metrical system. The celebration of power as virtue itself is evident in these lines from Hopkins’ “The Windhover: to Christ our Lord,” which describes the flight of a falcon:

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:
the hurl and
gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery
of the thing!
Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride,
plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee
then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous . . . (24)

In the “rebuffing” of the “big wind,” and the “mastery of the thing,” one can hear the praise of strength for its own sake, albeit symbolically as praise of the figure of Jesus. The phrase “Brute beauty” emphasizes the positive valuation of this strength; it is not a monstrous image of strength that is honored, but a brutality permeated by beauty. And in the “fire that breaks” from the falcon one can hear the “dangerous” manifestation of that power, a manifestation which is the power of both the speaker of the poem, and of the poet himself, despite the latter’s willingness to defer all honor to God.

Poetic Knowledge

In conclusion, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Spinoza, a canonical philosopher who

lived in the scientism-obsessed era known as modern philosophy, and who even understood his magnum opus as an elaborate geometric proof (complete with axioms and postulates), affirmed the irreducibility and importance of an entire other way of knowing that has a particular affinity to something outside of philosophy proper, namely the arts, and in particular poetry. What this suggests, in turn, is that human knowledge for Spinoza, and thereby education, can never be complete as long as we look only to philosophy, or rationalistic discourse. Instead, we must also move into the sphere of the arts.

This latter move remains a controversial one in philosophy to this day, so much so that (as I noted at the beginning of my essay), some scholars would rather even pretend that Spinoza never introduced the concept of intuition rather than linger with the kind of radical implications that I have elaborated in this essay. But to engage in this willful make-believe is to blind oneself, not only to an important and fascinating aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy, but also to one of the many ways that arts such as poetry can contribute to our knowledge of our place in our world—not to mention the conceptually rich work of poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins.

NOTES

1. G. H. R. Parkinson, “Editor’s Introduction” to *Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. and trans. G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.
2. *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 149. We will follow the system of citation used by Parkinson in his edition:
A = Axiom
C = Corollary
D = Definition
DE = Definition of the Emotions (Part 3)
L = Lemma
P = Proposition
S = Scholium
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 52.
4. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, ed. Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair (New York: Norton, 1988), 90.
5. J. R. Watson, *The Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (London: Penguin, 1989), 127.
6. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (New York: Digireads.com, 2010), 7.

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