
Contrariety and Complementarity: Reading Spinoza's Intersubjective Holism of Ideas with Aristotle's Two Accounts of Motion

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Abstract

Do minds and ideas connect, interact, or even depend on each other, and if so, how exactly do they connect and interact? How should we conceive of the mode and process of minds and ideas being in a network and connected in some way, that is, being intersubjective or social? Martin Lenz's study *Socializing Minds* convincingly shows that, contrary to widespread opinion in philosophy of mind, at least some early modern philosophers, here Spinoza, Locke, and Hume, actually give a positive answer to the first question and present models that respond to the second question, thus addressing what Lenz proposes calling 'the contact problem' and repudiating the idea that mentalism is necessarily bound to individualism. In this comment, I focus on a detail in Lenz's reconstruction of Spinoza's 'metaphysical model' of the intersubjectivity of minds, namely the Aristotelian physical dynamism that would underlie Spinoza's idea of the interaction of minds. While I agree that Spinoza's model of interaction of minds refers to the Aristotelian conception of motion, I argue that the guiding principle in natural motion is best understood not only in terms of contrariety but also in terms of complementarity. Admittedly, my proposal goes beyond Spinoza's model of ideas in contact, and probably beyond Lenz's interpretation of that model, but it might enrich the imagination of the socialising of minds and ideas from a kinetic point of view, which, at least as I understand it, is precisely what Spinoza and Lenz thrive on.

Keywords: Spinoza, Martin Lenz, Aristotle, motion, contrariety, complementarity, *conatus*, idea

1 In Search of the Underlying Model for Contrariety and Agreement

When analysing an abstract or concrete entity, an idea, a constellation, or a relationship, it is a common and current practice to explore the guiding principles that constitute, guide, or orient the entity in question. Starting from the well-established reading that Spinoza develops a concept of

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internal and external networks of minds (internal in the sense that a single mind consists of associated ideas, external in the sense that minds interact), a kind of 'holism of ideas' or 'ecology of minds,' Lenz is interested in the particular way and mode in which minds are connected and interact within these networks.¹ More specifically, the relationship in question is the dependence of minds (the minds of different people) on other minds, and how this relationship is in turn shaped by a particular conceptual resource. For Spinoza, Lenz sees the dependence of minds "rooted in the metaphysical model governed by a specific understanding of contrariety and agreement."² So the question is, what is the underlying model that guides the idea of contrariety and agreement as the two guiding principles or modes for the interaction and interdependence of minds? The answer to this question promises a well-drawn analysis of Spinoza's (metaphysically driven) 'model of intersubjectivity.' This model can be read as a response to the contact problem of minds, i.e., the question of how to conceive the concrete connection and interaction of ideas and minds.

Before embarking on a search for the underlying model, we should first sketch the general idea of an intersubjective or *social* holism of ideas (this is Lenz's interpretation of Spinoza's holism of ideas), and the basic 'mechanism' by which different minds are related to each other, and thus brought into some kind of social relationship. Based on the principle of a basic interrelatedness of things and of ideas (in general: mental states), "the content of an idea depends on the content of other ideas."³ Focussing on the content of ideas, this epistemological approach can also be called 'content holism.' What does this mean? Against an intramental and 'atomistic' interpretation of knowledge that states a simple "*idea-object relation*," Lenz spots an "idea-idea relation" which involves heterogenous ideas in one mind but also in other minds.⁴ For this "*intermental relation*"⁵ of ideas (and minds) in Spinoza's theory of mind, three elements are essential in Lenz's reading; they also consolidate the relating mechanism between ideas. Firstly—and this is a metaphysical axiom—ideas have a particular striving (a *conatus*), and ideas precisely connect to each other by confronting each other with their striving. Secondly, the confronting ideas and minds can be qualified as affirming ideas or contrary/opposing ideas. Thirdly, the contrariety of ideas (and minds) results in the exclusion of a belief or idea, with bodily affects determining (and also mediating) the holding or repudiation of an idea. As Spinoza puts it with regard to the idea of the existence of an external body:

If the human body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or the presence of that body (E2p17/G II 104).

1 Martin Lenz, *Socializing Minds: Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 31–32.

2 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 33.

3 *Ibid.*, 51.

4 *Ibid.*, 51.

5 *Ibid.*, 45.

Lenz refers to this proposition to emphasise what I would call the *inertia* of beliefs, or what he calls “belief fixation”⁶ or the “principle of the priority of belief”;⁷ that is, “[e]verything is believed unless it is excluded.”⁸ Technically, I would reformulate the belief fixation and the aspect of sociality of minds as follows:

An idea or belief *A* counts for a mind *a* as valid as long as or unless no stronger belief *B* appears that contradicts belief *A*.

This describes the basic process of belief fixation or ‘inertia of beliefs.’ Now suppose that belief *B* is in an external mind *b*, that is, applying a ‘socialised’ reading of belief fixation:

Belief *B* in mind *b* prompts mind *a* to exclude belief *A* (or the content of the idea) and to consider belief *B* to be valid.

Put the other way round, belief *A* is held by mind *a* as long as idea *B* in mind *b* supports or affirms or agrees with belief *A*. This is a strong version of a ‘socialised’ exclusion of beliefs; a weaker version would say that mind *a* holds belief *A* as long as there is no overriding belief *B* in mind *b*.⁹

According to Lenz, the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion of an idea, or, what Lenz calls the “principle of exclusion,” is based on the metaphysical aspect of contrariety: since “things (and minds) are of contrary nature,” they initiate interaction in terms of inclusion and exclusion. The question is then, if contrariety determines the principle of exclusion and the relation of ideas, what in turn determines contrariety? Answering this question also reveals the underlying model or principle that governs how networks and beliefs operate. For this, we need to go back to Spinoza’s general metaphysics and its theoretical sources.

Keeping in mind the pivotal *conatus* principle (“each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being,” E3p6/G II 146) and the natural philosophical foundation of Spinoza’s metaphysics (that I would also see as *meta-physics*¹⁰), which put the emphasis on bodies in motion and rest (as modes of/in God), it is by far not unplausible or inconsistent to also attribute to minds and ideas a *conatus*, i.e., a striving, and to conceive the exclusion principle and contrariety in a natural philosophical light, thus rejecting a merely logical or linguistic reading of contrariety. This is also the interpretative road Lenz takes.¹¹

6 Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid., 43.

8 Ibid., 54.

9 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this insightful distinction.

10 See on this notion Lorina Buhr, *Macht und Bewegung. Zur Meta-Physik im sozialen und politischen Machtbegriff im Ausgang von Aristoteles’ dynamis* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2023).

11 See Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, chap. 1.3.1.

2 Lenz's Physical Reading of the Contrariety of Ideas

Traditionally, since the Ionian philosophy of nature, but certainly since Aristotle's *natural philosophy* and (what is generally considered as) *metaphysics*, the key concept of natural philosophy has been motion (*kinēsis*, *metabolē*) and, as a subset of motion, change.¹² Early modern philosophy is still heavily influenced by Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, either formally (e.g., Hobbes, Descartes) or substantially, and Spinoza is no exception. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to see Aristotelian seeds and residues in Spinoza's metaphysics, and it appears absolutely coherent to read the conative striving (in general and the striving of an idea) and contrariety as dynamic or kinetic notions, i.e., as notions that are "crucial for the explanation of change."¹³ So far, so good. But if we think of motion in Aristotelian terms, then powers and principles of motion come into play—and this is where confusion comes in.

When explaining the dynamism underlying the notion of contrariety, Lenz identifies the theoretical root in the "contrary properties or powers" that "play a fundamental role in [Aristotle's] physical and biological explanation."¹⁴ These explanations are explanations of motions and processes in the organic and non-organic world. For Lenz, Spinoza "blends the opposition of physical forces into the contrariety of ideas, thus allowing for metaphysically conative [...] understanding of contrary relations between ideas."¹⁵

The problem I see with this reading is that there are no opposing or contrary powers (or forces, force is really an early modern notion) in Aristotle's account of natural motion, rather I see *complementary* or contrasting *powers* and *opposing principles*. This is because there are two accounts of motion in Aristotle's *Physics*, a principle-based account in *Physics* I.5–7, and a powers-based account of motion in *Physics* III.1. Both accounts should not be mixed up analytically, rather, I would argue, they provide two distinct but also complementary resources for conceptual and theoretical profiling. In the following, I will briefly sketch the two accounts of motion and then outline how they might lead to a diversified account of the principle of contrariety.

3 A Closer Look at Aristotle's Two Approaches of Motion

The first approach to motion in Aristotle's physics is the triadic structure of motion, based on the three principles of form (F, determination of a thing), privation of form (~F), and matter (subject/substratum of change). According to this, motion can be understood as the change from a non-existent determination or 'relative not-yet-determination' (privation, lack, *sterēsis*) of a form (~F) to a specific, desired or target determination F (form). This change proceeds on/in a substratum underlying the change (Phys. I.5-7; Met. VII.7). Thus, the opposing or polar principles of the (yet) non-existence

12 One might object that Aristotle excludes substantial change (*genesis*) from the category of motion (see *Physics* V.1). I prefer a reading of the concepts of motion and change as one (pivotal) category of Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics, thus standing in a Thomistic tradition of reading these concepts in a broader sense.

13 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 68.

14 Ibid., 66. Lenz sees the theoretical root of the notion of contrariety primarily in Aristotle's *Physics*, see 23, 56, 66–70.

15 Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 68.

of a form/state and the form/state F are the starting and endpoint of a motion. For Aristotle all changes such as becoming thin, ill, white, healthy, skilled, or growing, constructing a house and decreasing, are motions. In terms of contrariety, the triadic principle-based approach describes motion as the turnover or change from a ‘negative’ or non-existent state/principle 1 (let’s say, for instance, weak or not strong) to a realised ‘positive’ state/principle 2 (strong) at a material basis (principle 3, a foal). The first two principles take up the familiar scheme in the history of (transcultural) thought of oppositely organised and irreducible first principles in the form of a principle dualism (e.g., fire & earth, fullness & emptiness, good & evil) (see Phys. I.5, 188a19-30). With the help of the two principles and the setting of the third principle (*hypokeimenon*), which underlies an emergent motion, Aristotle wants to demonstrate the basic comprehensibility of all accidental motions.

Whereas the triadic and principle-based model is best understood as a grid for analysing motions and not as a definition of natural motion in the strict sense, Aristotle’s second approach to motion indeed provides a definition of natural motion and is based on a dyadic structure.¹⁶ Let us first have a look at the dyadic structure. From a conceptual and analytical perspective, natural motion presents a specific relational structure comprising two components: a moving body (*to kinoun*) and a moved body (*to kinoumenon*); or of moving (*kinein*) and being moved (*kineisthai*).¹⁷ The moving and the moved can be conceived as two abstract moments of a motion, as two distinct things in one entity, or as two distinct ontic units that are unified in a motion. As already known from the triadic structure, motion always takes place on a bearing subject, a subject of change or motion, and motion is the becoming of a form or the bringing into form of a thing. Or, as Aristotle puts it: “motion is the fulfilment of the movable as movable” (Phys. III.2, 202a7). For this to happen, the thing/body that is moved must in principle be designed for this motion, it must have a principle or power for becoming able to be moved, and the moving thing/body must have an active power for being able to activate a particular motion on the thing/body being moved. From this definitional perspective, two powers (*dynameis*), or as some translate them ‘potentialities,’ an ‘active’ and a ‘passive,’ constitute a motion when they get in contact and are both ‘in fulfilment’ (*entelecheia*) (Phys. III 2, 202a21–24). Here we seem to be dealing with opposite or contrary powers that determine a particular motion or change, but since they present a kind of ‘fit’ or ‘match,’ they are best understood as correlative or complementary powers rather than as contrary powers. More precisely, the aspects of complementarity and correlativity are key to understanding the relationship of the powers involved in motion.

To summarise the brief outline of Aristotle’s account of motion, we find a triadic, principle-based approach, which is indeed based on the idea of contrariety of principles. Here the transition from a privative state/principle (weak or not strong) to a realised state/principle/form (strong) of or in a body describes motion along a scale of contrariety. The contrariety of the principles is determined by an inner relation, namely the privation and fulfilment of a form. We can also say that the realised form replaces the privative state. The dyadic approach, however, is based on complementary powers,

16 For the distinction between a description and a definition of motion in Aristotle, see Rémi Brague, “Aristotle’s Definition of Motion and Its Ontological Implications,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13, no. 2 (1990): 1–22.

17 Eugen Fink, *Zur Ontologischen Frühgeschichte von Raum – Zeit – Bewegung* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957), 170.

namely active and passive (or 'agentive' and 'patient') powers, which, both activated and in connection with each other (*hapsis*), constitute a motion in the subject of the motion. These powers are extended to notions of potentiality and activation (some scholars interpret it as 'actuality') and fulfilment, which in turn, I would argue, support the emphasis on complementarity instead of contrariety.

4 Contrariety, Complementarity, and Contrast

Let us now bring Aristotle's accounts of motion, as introduced above, back to Lenz's claims that first, contrariety responds to the contact problem of minds, and second, the principle of contrariety found in Spinoza's philosophy of mind is a natural philosophical notion that uses Aristotle's thoughts on motion, in particular the idea of "opposing forces" as a conceptual resource.¹⁸

As for the second claim, I think that Spinoza's statement about the exclusion of opposing ideas of existence, as expressed in E2p17, fits well with Aristotle's triadic structure of motion and supports Lenz's claim about contrariety as the core issue in the intersubjective holism of ideas. We can think of the transition of an affected body (and mind) from the state of holding an idea (there is a unicorn on the lawn, to take Lenz's example) to the state of rejecting the idea (there is no unicorn on the lawn) as a change from one principle to the opposite principle in a mind, whereas the holding of the final idea can be caused by an idea in the same mind or by an idea from a different mind. Here, contrariety connects the starting point of a motion/affection with the end point of a motion/affection and characterises the relationship between the principles of motion/ideas that are valid for a particular mind. In other words, contrariety is realised in motion or change. That is why this approach could also be referred to as the 'contrariety-in-motion model' or 'kinetic model of contrariety,' as I would suggest. The contrariety-in-motion model nicely shows how two opposing ideas (the idea of the existence of a unicorn and the idea of the non-existence of a unicorn on the lawn) can come into contact by being part of a change in the holders' beliefs. Thus, the reconstruction of contact and contrariety as referring to Aristotle's triadic model of motion appears accurate. However, contrary to Lenz's assumption, no powers (or "forces") are involved here.

Nevertheless, I suggest that the powers-based approach to motion can expand the understanding of pairs of affects, emotions, and ideas, such as love and hate, joy and sorrow. Although Spinoza himself speaks of "contrary affects" with regard to the state of mind (e.g., E3p17s/G II 153-4), this kind of contrariety might better not be thought of in the narrow sense of privation, such as existence and non-existence, weak and strong, ill and healthy. Rather, we can think of the contrariety of affects and ideas in analogy to the principle of complementarity and correlation that governs the relation of the powers (or potentialities) constituting a motion in the subject of motion. This means thinking of an affection as an interplay of two complementary and correlative ideas: no idea of joy without the idea of sorrow and sadness, no idea of health without the idea of being ill. The focus on complementarity could help to further develop the exclusion principle. As Lenz points out, "not every idea can enter" the mind, but rather "the content of ideas seems negatively determined by the

18 To put it bluntly, Lenz's claim can also be reformulated as saying that the notion of contrariety at stake is an Aristotelian notion.

ideas of other minds in that it is set apart by contrariety.”¹⁹ But how should we understand this negative determination? I suggest that the negative determination can be informed by the principles of complementarity and contrast. To elaborate on this point, we can even go one step further, beyond Aristotle’s dyadic approach of motion, and think of complementarity as a kind of contrasting complementarity, as we find it in the concept of contrasting colours in the field of art.²⁰ Contrasting colours, such as green and red, blue and yellow, create a kind of dynamism; they have a moving effect when juxtaposed. Here we find opposition and complementarity at the same time, mediated by the effect of contrasts. Applied to Spinozean pairs of ideas, we could imagine that love and hate, just as red and green, appear on the one hand as opposites, but, on the other, also as contrasts and complements, and by creating a contrast, these ideas become associated in some way. Then, in turn, the connection of ideas arises precisely from this contrasting and complementary juxtaposition. From this perspective, it is the complementarity in the juxtaposition of love and hate that sets ideas of sociality in motion. This does not mean that contrasting ideas, such as love and hate, must be present at the same time, that is, that one must love and hate a thing at the same time; rather, it inspires us to conceive of contrasting ideas as contoured by their complementary counterpart.

Admittedly, this suggestion needs further investigation in Spinoza’s philosophy, and current philosophies of mind. For this reason, I would not regard this interpretative suggestion as a correction of Lenz’s reading, but rather as inspiration for further research on modelling sociality and social relationships.

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¹⁹ Lenz, *Socializing Minds*, 55.

²⁰ See, for instance, Jonathan Itten, *Kunst der Farbe* (Berlin: Urania, Freiburg, 1991).