Don Garrett, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy*.

New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, xiv+533 pp.

The publication of Garrett’s *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy* is a major event in the study of modern philosophy and Spinoza in particular. The book collects most of Garrett’s articles on Spinoza which appeared between 1979 and 2017. During these four decades the study of Spinoza in the Anglo-American world has undergone a dramatic transformation, as the previously disreputable and poorly understood metaphysician has acquired preeminence and wide respect as a highly original, systematic, and audacious thinker. Currently, the study of Spinoza appears to be the most thriving and innovative of subfield within the wider discipline of the history of philosophy. Garrett deserves a significant part of the credit for this present state of affairs, due both to his outstanding scholarship and to his influential mentorship and support of younger scholars.

In his introduction, Garrett identifies the problem-driven common feature of the eighteen studies comprising the book: “all are intended, at least in large part, to resolve challenging and central problems in the interpretation of Spinoza’s difficult but important philosophy” (3). Regardless of whether one agrees with Garrett’s solutions to the deep challenges he attempts to solve, each and every study in this volume is a real gem which requires repeated reading before evaluation. Four of the studies are accompanied by postscripts in which Garrett responds to critiques but also makes crucial and astute revisions of his previous views. Taken together, the articles and postscripts provide a panoramic perspective on Spinoza’s philosophy as a whole, as well as current, cutting-edge research agendas concerning each of its aspects.

Following an introductory essay which provides an overview of Spinoza’s “metaphysics of blessedness,” the rest of the volume is divided into six sections. The first section contains Garrett’s seminal studies of Spinoza’s proofs of God’s existence (Ch. 2), and Spinoza's necessitarianism (Ch. 3), as well as a high-resolution examination of a crucial link (E1p5[[1]](#footnote-1)) in a proof of God’s existence that has troubled discerning readers and commentators for more than three centuries (Ch. 4). The three studies in the second section deal with Spinoza’s epistemology, broadly construed, and address Spinoza’s understanding of truth and of the imagination in his early and unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (Ch. 5), Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s distinct responses to Descartes’ method of doubt (Ch. 6), and Spinoza’s theory of *scientia intuitiva*, the highest kind of cognition (Ch. 7). As Garrett shows in the latter study*,* *scientia intuitiva* does not involve some mystical experience (as many tend to think), but rather the systematic tracing of “the fundamental causal structure of God (i.e., Nature)” (214) and a participation in the way in which God knows himself.

The book’s third section contains three chapters on Spinoza’s attributes: a study of Spinoza’s and Locke’s critical responses to the Cartesian arguments against the possibility of things which are *both* extended and thinking (Ch. 8), a substantial attempt to resolve the enigmas involved in Spinoza’s thorny discussion of mind eternity (Ch. 9), and a fascinating study of the inter-relations among the attributes and the substance (Ch. 10), the conclusion of which leads Garrett to propose that Spinoza’s attributes are fundamental kinds, or manners, of existence “that are not *in* the ontology but are rather structures of it” (287). The fourth section contains a scrupulous study of Spinoza’s theory of metaphysical individuation (Ch. 11). This is followed by an iconoclastic chapter on teleology in the early modern rationalists in which Garrett suggests that Spinoza’s rejection of teleology is far more reserved than is commonly considered, and that, in a certain manner, Spinoza was more amenable to Aristotelian teleology than were both Descartes and Leibniz. This is a superb study, though I tend to see the aims of Spinoza’s critique of teleology as being more ambitious than Garrett does. Specifically, I believe Garrett’s reading does not sufficiently appreciate the tight connection between Spinoza’s critique of free will and his rejection of human, thoughtful teleology. Part of the issue at stake is the precise definition of teleology, and an exploration of this important subject cannot be carried out in the current, limited space. The final chapter of the fourth section is an insightful and innovative reading of Spinoza’s doctrine of the *conatus* according to which even modes are, to an extent, in-themselves, and thus constitute limited approximations to the genuine, unique substance (377).

Section five contains two excellent chapters on Spinoza’s understanding of intentionality and consciousness. Underlying both chapters is Garrett’s sympathetic attitude toward Spinoza’s panpsychism, and toward his commitment to strict naturalism that does not allow for the brute reality – or “sudden appearance” – of mental features (428). Chapter 14 suggests that Spinoza’s view of consciousness relies heavily on the *conatus* doctrine. According to Garrett, Spinoza identifies consciousness [*conscientia*] with the power of thinking [*cogitandi potentia*] which itself is nothing but the degree of self-preserving activity the mind of a given individual has (409). Building on this understanding of consciousness, the following chapter attempts to provide an explanation for Spinoza’s claim that even our sense-perception of external bodies encodes information about the most remote causes of the perceived bodies (Ch. 15). The chapter suggests a novel account of Spinoza’s understanding of error and culminates in a convincing explication of the distinction between the *objectum* of an idea (the object parallel to, and identical with, the idea), and its *ideatum* (what the idea is of).

The three chapters of the book’s sixth and final section are dedicated to Spinoza’s ethics and political philosophy. Following an incisive study of Spinoza’s “Free Man” – the *Ethics*’ model of a fully rational person (Ch. 16) – Garrett turns to provide a well-rounded account of the various strands of Spinoza’s moral theory and their psychological, and ultimately metaphysical, grounds (Ch. 17). The book concludes with a chapter that compares Spinoza’s views on the nature of right, power, and the validity of social contract with the views of Hobbes. While both Hobbes and Spinoza ground much of their politics in the human striving for self-preservation, Garrett perceptively notes significant differences in their understanding what self-preservation is.

In the remainder of this review I would like to look closely at one crucial revision Garrett suggests to the earliest article in the volume. His 1979 piece “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument” appeared in this journal while he was still in graduate school. The article is a landmark of Spinoza scholarship not only because of its unprecedentedly high-resolution analysis of Spinoza’s proofs, but also because it introduces the term “principle of sufficient reason” [=PSR] as a label for Spinoza’s insistence that every state of affairs, or its absence, must have a complete explanation. The centrality of the PSR in Spinoza has been elegantly and convincingly demonstrated in Michael Della Rocca’s recent and most influential work.

In E1p11 Spinoza offers four arguments for the existence of God, i.e., a substance having infinitely many attributes. The first of these four arguments – slightly simplified – relies on the definition of God as a substance and on Spinoza’s proof that a substance cannot be caused, or produced, by anything else (E1p6c). Assuming tacitly that everything must have a cause, Spinoza infers in E1p7 that since a substance cannot be caused by anything else, it must be a cause of itself, or – per the definition of *causa sui* in E1d1 – that it must have a nature, or essence, which necessitates its existence. From the proposition that each substance has a nature which necessitates its existence (E1p7), and the definition of God as a substance (E1d6), Spinoza seems to be entitled to infer in the first proof of E1p11 that God necessarily exists insofar as it has a nature, or essence, which necessitates its existence.

Challenging this proof, Garrett writes in 1979: “…even if Spinoza’s principle of sufficient reason is granted, however, it follows only that every actually *existing* substance is self-caused, and so has an essence involving existence. For a possible substance might fail to have some other thing for its cause, and fail to be the cause of itself, and yet not to be exiting-without-a-cause – by not existing at all…[T]he first proof of E1p11 could show only that *if* God exists at all, *then* He exists necessarily” (36). These words – which echo a common and widely accepted critique of the ontological argument – are withdrawn in Garrett’s recent postscript to the article in which he asserts that a possible being with an essence “which did *not* involve existence would not even be a *possible* substance” (56). Why? Consider an alleged possible substance *s*. This alleged substance may not be instantiated in the actual world, but insofar as this thing is possible, there is a possible world *w* in which *s* is instantiated. Assuming that the definitions and axioms of Part One of the *Ethics* are necessary,[[2]](#footnote-2) they are all true in *w*. Insofar as E1p7 follows necessarily from these definitions and axioms, E1p7 too is true in *w*. Therefore, were *s* not to have an essence involving existence, it would not – per E1p7 – be a substance.

Having made this crucial corrective, Garrett’s postscript still leaves open the difficult question of whether Spinoza is entitled to assume that God is a *possible* substance, i.e., whether the definition of God is internally consistent (59). One way to prove the internal consistency of the definition is to rule out all the ways in which it could turn out to be internally inconsistent. But can we even provide an *exhaustive* list of the ways in which the definition of God – “a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes” – might turn out to be internally inconsistent? Ostensibly, if any one of the concepts of substance, attribute, or infinity were internally inconsistent, or if two (or more) of the attributes were incompatible, the definition of God would not be consistent. Michael Della Rocca has insightfully suggested that the radical heterogeneity of Spinoza’s attributes seems to rule out their incompatibility (Della Rocca 2002, 28-9). The simplicity of the substance and its attributes (E1p12) might provide a ground for rejecting the possibility of a contradiction lurking within each. Still, how does one even go about proving the consistency of Spinoza’s understanding of infinity?

Foundational questions are frequently accompanied by perplexity. In the current volume, Garrett succeeds time and again to untangle and clarify the deepest, most difficult and stubborn problems of (Spinoza’s) philosophy. Indeed, if “there is no joy like the joy of sorting out perplexities,” *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy* is a work of pure bliss.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**References**

Bledin, Justin and Yitzhak Y. Melamed. Manuscript. “*Ethica More Logico Demonstrsta*.”

Della Rocca, Michael. 2002. “Spinoza’s Substance Monism” in John Biro and Olli Koistinen (eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 11-37.

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1. I use the following standard abbreviation for passages in the *Ethics*: a(-xiom), and p(-roposition); ‘d’ stands for either ‘definition’ (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or ‘demonstration’ (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Bledin and Melamed (manuscript), §5.2 For Spinoza, adequate definitions must capture the essence of the things defined, and axioms are statements of eternal truths other than the essence of things. Thus, he considered both kinds of statements as necessary truths. E1p7 relies on very few, trivial, tacit premises that are required for the validity of the demonstrations upon which it relies. These tacit, trivial premises must also be necessary in order for E1p7 to be true in every possible world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I would like to thank Zach Gartenberg and Justin Bledin for comments on an earlier draft of this review. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)