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Abbreviations

DESCARTES' WORKS

- AT Adam and Tannery (eds.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*
 CSM Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (eds. and trans.),
The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (third volume edited by
 A. Kenny also)

SPINOZA'S WORKS

- CM *Cogitata Metaphysica* (an appendix to Spinoza's DPP)
 C Curley (ed.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1
 DPP *Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II* (*Descartes'*
Principles of Philosophy)
 Ep. Spinoza's Letters
 GLE *Compendium Grammatices Linguae Hebraeae*
 KV *Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand* (*Short*
Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being)
 NS *Nagelaten Schriften* (the 1677 Dutch translation of Spinoza's works)
 OP *Opera Posthuma*
 S Shirley (ed.), *Spinoza: Complete Works*
 TdIE *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*
 TTP *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

Passages in Spinoza's *Ethics* are referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a-(xiom), c-(orollary), e-(xplanation), l-(emma), p-(roposition), s-(cholium), and app-(endix); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book) or 'demonstration' (in all other cases). The five parts of the *Ethics* are cited by Arabic numerals. Thus "E1d3" stands for the third definition of part 1 and "E1p16d" for the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1. Passages from DPP are cited using the same system of abbreviations used for the *Ethics*.

References to Gebhardt (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, follow this format: volume number, page number, line number. Hence "II/200/12" stands for volume 2, page 200, line 12. Passages from AT are cited by volume and page number. Thus "AT VII 23" stands for page 23 of volume 7 of this edition.

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§1. METHODOLOGY

It is a mark of maturity when a discipline turns to question its own assumptions. Indeed, over the past thirty years there has been an important debate among Anglo-American scholars over the proper method for the study of the history of philosophy. One attitude takes the history of philosophy to be of interest only to the extent that it is relevant to current philosophical debates. In most cases, this demand for relevance has been translated into claims of the form “P is a philosopher worth studying because already in the x th century he suggested views that have only recently been developed by contemporary scientists or philosophers.” Although I do not wish to make generalizations, I do believe that at least some variations of this argument are foolish. Leibniz, for example, is sometimes praised for advocating the relativity of time and space. As far as I can see, such praises commit a simple Gettier fallacy. Assuming that the theory of relativity is true, Leibniz indeed held a justified, true belief, but it is certainly not true *by virtue* of the reasons Leibniz had in mind, because he did not believe in an upper limit to possible velocity. Thus, even though

the theory of relativity agrees with Leibniz's belief in the relativity of space, this does not at all vindicate Leibniz's views, because the agreement is merely coincidental.

I do strongly believe that philosophical relevance is important, but the question is whether a past philosopher must agree with our views in order to be relevant. Unlike those who scan the history of philosophy for precursors to their own views, I believe that the history of philosophy provides us with very fruitful and rare opportunities to *challenge* (rather than confirm) our most basic beliefs and intuitions by studying texts that are both well-argued and strongly opposed to our commonsense. The arguments of past philosophers may help us diagnose our own blind spots (i.e., claims that we take to be natural and obvious without ever attempting to motivate them).¹

In this book, I occasionally compare and contrast Spinoza's views with contemporary ones in an attempt to shed light on his claims. However, the ideas expressed in the last two chapters, which are the book's most innovative parts, have few if any equivalents in current metaphysics or philosophy of mind. I find this a merit, not a blemish, insofar as the discovery of new conceptual lands expands our thought and exercises our philosophical imagination.

Spinoza, like many other philosophical authors, changed and developed his views throughout his life. This book concentrates on Spinoza's main work, the *Ethics*. Although I do believe that Spinoza's early works are of considerable importance, I have tried not to substantiate any of my major claims merely on the authority of his early texts and letters. Indeed, Spinoza's correspondence could provide the skeleton for a much-needed work on the genesis of the *Ethics* (i.e., the story of the development of the book and its various drafts).² Although I occasionally make some suggestions about the development of Spinoza's views, that is not my primary concern in this book.

Another significant controversy among Spinoza scholars concerns the proper historical context for Spinoza's views. Usually, this controversy is guided primarily by the expertise of the scholars involved: scholars of Jewish philosophy (who can work easily with medieval Hebrew texts) regard the medieval Jewish context as decisive; Dutch scholars choose the political and intellectual climate of seventeenth-century Netherlands as the appropriate context; and most other scholars (being professional early modernists, trained in Latin, but not in Hebrew or Dutch) stress the influence of Descartes and sometimes other contemporary figures (such as Suarez). Obviously, this is just another example of the old story about the three blind zoologists who were examining different limbs of an elephant and concluded decisively that the

1. For a detailed presentation of my views on the philosophy of the history of philosophy, see my "Charitable Interpretations."

2. In "The Development of Spinoza's Concepts of Substance and Attribute," I present one chapter of such a hypothetical study.

animal in question was “just a snake,” “clearly a hippopotamus,” and “undoubtedly a rhino.” As one can see from these remarks, I believe that *all* these contexts (i.e., medieval Jewish philosophy, Descartes and Cartesianism, late scholasticism, seventeenth-century Dutch philosophy and politics) are important. Obviously, however, it is quite likely that, in one way or another, my elephant is still pretty snakish.

§2. THE METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES BEHIND SPINOZA’S SYSTEM

(i) *The principle of sufficient reason*

In the past few years, Michael Della Rocca has developed an interpretation of Spinoza that stresses the central role of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) in Spinoza’s philosophy. On this issue, as on many others, I completely agree with him. Yet, unlike Della Rocca, I do not believe this principle is the key to all doors in Spinoza’s palace. Particularly, I disagree with what Della Rocca terms “the twofold use of the PSR” (i.e., the claim that for Spinoza everything must be reduced to and explained in terms of conceivability).³ I appreciate the ingenuity and boldness of this thesis, yet I do not think it is well documented in Spinoza’s text, nor do I find it consistent with one of Spinoza’s most fundamental claims: the causal and conceptual separation of the attributes (E1p10 and E2p6).⁴ This being said, let me stress that the PSR motivates many of the most important and intriguing doctrines of the *Ethics* (such as necessitarianism, the identity of indiscernibles, substance monism, and perhaps even the *conatus*), and in this work I frequently point to Spinoza’s bold and rich employment of this principle.

(ii) *The priority of the infinite over the finite*

Spinoza’s second major metaphysical principle is far less recognized in the existing literature, and for this reason I will elaborate on it briefly. In various places in his works, Spinoza asserts that the infinite is prior to the finite both “in nature” and “in knowledge.”⁵ It is easy to underappreciate the boldness of this claim because it appears similar to the common medieval and early modern theistic view that all things depend on God. Indeed, the ontological (“in nature”) priority of the infinite in Spinoza is more or less equivalent to this traditional notion of dependence. Some of Spinoza’s predecessors and contemporaries considered the infinite to be

3. See Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 2, 50.

4. I develop this criticism of Della Rocca in my “Sirens of Elea.”

5. See, for example, KV I 22 | I/101/3–7, KV I 7 | I/68/18, KV II 24 | I/107/1, E2p10s2 | 93/32, TTP ch. 2 | III/30, TdIE §§75, 90.

also epistemologically (“in knowledge”) prior to all things, in the restricted sense that as long as we are not certain about God’s existence, we cannot be certain about any other knowledge. Spinoza would accept this view. He is not that much bothered by the threat of skepticism, but he wholeheartedly accepts the claim that the knowledge of all things depends on, and presupposes, the knowledge of God’s essence. The fourth axiom of part 1 of the *Ethics*—“the cognition of an effect depends on, and involves, the cognition of its cause”—commits Spinoza to the view that insofar as God’s essence is the cause of all things (E1p16c1), the cognition of all things depends on the cognition of God’s essence. Thus, if we are to avoid radical skepticism, we must have clear epistemological access to the essence of God. Relying on this crucial axiom, Spinoza asserts in E2p47 that “the human mind has an adequate cognition of God’s infinite and eternal essence” and that “God’s infinite and eternal essence is known to all” (E2p47s). This trivialization of the knowledge of God’s essence (one cannot fail to have this knowledge!) would hardly be acceptable to any of Spinoza’s contemporaries or predecessors, yet Spinoza takes it as a necessary result of the epistemological priority of the infinite (assuming the rejection of radical skepticism). Bold as this claim is, Spinoza goes even further.

In one of the most important yet underappreciated moves in the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that the “the proper order of philosophizing” (i.e., the order through which we should proceed in order to *discover* truths) must *begin* with the infinite. Consider the following passage in which Spinoza criticizes his predecessors who

did not observe the [proper] order of Philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things that are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because these could not assist knowledge of the divine nature. (E2p10s2)

I will not discuss the precise targets of Spinoza’s critique here,⁶ but let me briefly unpack the main points of this important passage. According to Spinoza, you cannot arrive at God (or the ultimate reality) at the *end* of a process of purification of your concepts, as, for example, Diotima memorably suggests in the *Symposium*

6. In other places, I have argued that Spinoza addresses here both Descartes and the Platonists. See my review of Ayers and my “Metaphysics of the TTP,” §2, where I also discuss in more detail the priority of the infinite.

(210, 211). For Spinoza, if you begin your epistemological journey with the beauty of Callias, you will end up with the purified beauty of Callias, which is still all too human. If you arrive at God at the *end* of the process, you are likely to have a conception of God cast in the image of the things with which you began your journey. That is, I think, the meaning of Spinoza's claim that "when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions."

For Spinoza, the epistemological path that begins with finite things—such as the beauty of Callias or Descartes' *cogito*—does not allow us to understand even the nature of finite things, because, as we have just seen, all things are to be known through their causes (E1a4). Hence we *must* begin with the knowledge of the infinite, the cause of all things, before turning to the knowledge of finite things. Without knowing the infinite, we cannot gain any knowledge of finite things. This is what Spinoza meant when he complained about his philosophical predecessors: "When they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature."

Of course, one could and should raise objections to this bold move of Spinoza's. All I wish to do here, however, is document this principle and show some of its implications. The priority of the infinite and the PSR are two independent principles for Spinoza, and neither one is derived from the other. There is much more to be said about the interrelations between these two principles in Spinoza's system. In most cases, they work harmoniously to produce key doctrines (such as in the claim that two substances cannot be distinguished by their modes [E1p5d]), but on a few other occasions (such as in the issue of necessitarianism⁷), they push in opposite directions. These conflicts provide us with real insights into the innermost workings of Spinoza's systems, and I hope to study them in the future.

§3. WHAT IS AN ATTRIBUTE?

The concept of attribute lies at the very center of Spinoza's metaphysics. Attributes, along with substance and modes, constitute the basic building blocks of Spinoza's ontology, but their precise nature has been the subject of a long and fierce controversy. Although I have my own view on this issue, I do not develop it here because the topic is merely tangential to the book, and an adequate treatment of it would take us too far afield.⁸ Still, I would like to provide a very brief explanation of the nature

7. See the end of chapter 3 and my paper "Why Spinoza Is Not an Eleatic Monist."

8. For an outline of my reading of the attributes, see §2 of my paper "Building Blocks."

of attributes as two of the topics discussed in this book (the distinction between modes of God and modes of attributes in chapter 2, and the parallelism among the attributes in chapter 5) are closely tied to this issue.

Spinoza defines attribute at the opening of the *Ethics*: “By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (*Per attributum intelligo id, quod intellectus de substantia percipit, tanquam ejusdem essentiam constituens*) (E1d4). Shortly afterward he defines God as “a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence” (E1d6). It is clear that between God—the only substance in Spinoza’s world (E1p14)—and the attributes, there is a very tight connection. Indeed, in some early drafts of the *Ethics*, Spinoza virtually switches the definitions of substance and attribute.⁹ One obvious contrast between substance and attributes is that, for Spinoza, there is only *one* substance, but *infinitely many* attributes (which belong to that substance).¹⁰ Spinoza also contrasts the *absolute infinity* of God, the only substance, with the weaker *infinity in its own kind* of the attributes (E1d6e). Finally, the attributes can be compared with Spinozist modes, as both are qualities. Modes are changeable qualities that do not constitute the essence of substance, whereas attributes are eternal (E1p19) and constitute the essence of substance.

How do the infinitely many attributes relate to Spinoza’s one substance? Although an adequate and detailed answer to this question would lead us to numerous interpretive controversies,¹¹ we can, I believe, safely rule out one possible answer. The attributes cannot be *parts* of the substance, because one of the main features of Spinoza’s substance is its indivisibility (E1p13). In fact, Spinoza stresses that the attributes too are indivisible (E1p12).

From our very brief discussion so far, we can see that the attributes are the essential, eternal, indivisible, and infinite qualities of the one substance. Let us add another crucial characteristic of the attributes. The attributes are *conceptually and causally independent of each other*. In E1p10, Spinoza proves that each attribute, just

9. See my “Development of Spinoza’s Concepts of Substance and Attribute.”

10. Jonathan Bennett (*Study*, 75–78) argued that the definition of God does not commit Spinoza to the existence of infinitely many attributes, because by saying that God has infinite attributes (E1d6), Spinoza merely meant that God has all attributes. According to Bennett, Spinoza is not at all committed to the existence of any attributes beyond the two attributes with which we are acquainted: extension and thought. In my “Building Blocks,” I point out a variety of textual and theoretical considerations showing that Spinoza is committed to the existence of infinitely many attributes beyond extension and thought. Still, I believe Bennett did us a great service in questioning and drawing our attention to the reasons that made Spinoza assign infinitely many attributes to God, a crucial and difficult question that had hardly been raised, let alone discussed, before Bennett.

11. For a mapping of the major controversies, see my “Building Blocks,” §2.

like the substance, is conceived through itself; later, in E2p6, Spinoza relies on E1p10 to prove that the attributes are causally independent of each other. In other words, items belonging to different attributes cannot causally interact. A mode belonging to the attribute of extension cannot interact with modes belonging to any other attribute. At the beginning of part 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza attempts to prove (in a very problematic manner) that extension and thought are the two attributes with which we are acquainted (E2p1, E2p2). In E2a5, he stipulates that we cannot have access to any of the infinitely many other attributes. In chapter 6 of this book, I explain what motivated Spinoza to make this stipulation. This view of extension and thought as the two essential attributes is an element that Spinoza inherited from Descartes, yet in a very typical move, Spinoza scrutinizes and radically reshapes this Cartesian inheritance.¹²

Spinoza makes several other intriguing claims about the attributes (e.g., that substances cannot share the same attribute [E1p5]), but these need not be addressed now. I do wish, however, to conclude this brief presentation of Spinoza's notion of attributes with a short text that is closely studied in the last two chapters of the book. In a celebrated passage in E2p7s, Spinoza writes:

A circle existing in nature and the idea of the existing circle, which is also in God, are one and the same thing, which is explicated [*explicatur*] through different attributes. Therefore [*et ideo*], whether we conceive nature under the attribute of Extension, or under the attribute of Thought, or under any other attribute, we shall find one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes, i.e., that the same things follow one another.

There are three closely related claims in this passage: (1) In the second sentence, Spinoza seems to assert the existence of an *isomorphism* or *parallelism* (“one and the same order, or one and the same connection of causes”) among the attributes (or, more precisely, among the items belonging to the various attributes). (2) The first sentence seems to claim that what grounds this parallelism (pay attention to the word “therefore” [*et ideo*], which connects the two sentences) is an *identity* among items belonging to different attributes (such as “a circle existing in nature and the idea of the existing circle”). (3) The first sentence also suggests that the various attributes are *explications* of one and the same underlying reality. One way of understanding this relation of explication is by viewing the attributes as various (causally

12. The proper historical background for Spinoza's understanding of attributes is Descartes' discussion of the relation between substances and their essential attributes and, to a lesser extent, the medieval discussion of divine attributes. I address this issue in my “Building Blocks,” §2.

and conceptually independent) *aspects* of one and the same substance. Throughout this work, I attempt to develop this understanding of the attributes as aspects of the substance whenever relevant.¹³

Spinoza's two other major ontological concepts—substance and mode—are explained in chapter 1, which, together with this section of the introduction, should provide a concise outline of Spinoza's metaphysics, helping readers who are less familiar with the *Ethics* penetrate into Spinoza's world.

§4. AN OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

This book is comprised of two parts. The first four chapters concentrate on the metaphysics of substance, while the last two address Spinoza's metaphysics of thought. These two parts are closely connected, and several crucial claims in the last two chapters rely on arguments advanced in the first four. I intentionally use the term 'metaphysics of thought' rather than 'philosophy of mind' for two main reasons: First, the domain of thought in Spinoza is far more extensive than anything associated with human minds, as will become clear by the end of the work. Second, my primary interest in the last two chapters is in the ontology of thought in Spinoza, rather than in the kinds of questions we associate with the philosophy of mind.

In the first chapter, I study the substance-mode relation in Spinoza and criticize Edwin Curley's influential interpretation of the nature of this relation. Relying on a variety of texts and considerations, I establish that Spinozist modes both inhere in and are predicated of the substance. I show that Pierre Bayle's famous critique of Spinoza's claim that all things inhere in God is based on crucial misunderstandings. I also argue that this claim of Spinoza's involves no category mistake, and I criticize Curley's use of the principle of charity to motivate his reading. Finally, I discuss the similarities between Spinoza's understanding of modes and current trope theories.

In the second chapter, I draw some of the implications of the first chapter. I explain the nature of immanent cause in Spinoza. I discuss and criticize the German Idealists' acosmist interpretation of Spinoza, according to which Spinoza revived the radical monism of the Eleatics and assigned no genuine reality to modes. Finally, I draw a crucial distinction, implicit in Spinoza's text, between modes of particular attributes and modes under all attributes.

In the third chapter, I address Michael Della Rocca's recent suggestion that a strict endorsement of the PSR leads to the identification of the relations of inherence, causation, and conception. I argue (a) that we have no textual support indicating that Spinoza endorsed such an identity, and (b) that Della Rocca's suggestion cannot

13. For further discussion of this issue, see my paper "Building Blocks," §2.

be considered a legitimate reconstruction of or friendly amendment to Spinoza's system because it creates several acute and irresolvable problems in it. At the end of the chapter, I present my own view of the relation among inherence, causation, and conception. I offer a new interpretation of the *conceived through* relation in Spinoza. I show which of the aforementioned relations are in time, and which are not, and finally I defend the presence of (non-arbitrary) bifurcations at the very center of Spinoza's system.

The fourth chapter is dedicated to Spinoza's concept of the infinite modes, apparently the only Spinozist concept that has no equivalent among his predecessors or contemporaries. The issue of the infinite modes is located at a juncture that is crucial for understanding some of the most important doctrines of Spinoza's metaphysics, such as the flow of the modes from the essence of substance, necessitarianism, the part-whole relation, and the nature of infinity. Unfortunately, our understanding of this important concept is still very limited. I attempt to break new ground in examining the nature of the infinite mode by postponing the discussion of the infinite modes of extension and thought, which have been the primary focus of previous studies, and concentrating instead on the *structural* features of infinite modes in general. I attempt to derive from Spinoza's text the general features of the infinite modes, regardless of the attribute to which they belong. Then I explain what pressures within his system made Spinoza introduce the concept of infinite modes. At the very end of the chapter, I discuss Spinoza's scattered remarks about the nature of the infinite modes of extension and thought in light of the general characteristics of the infinite modes uncovered in the previous parts of the chapter.

In the next two chapters, I argue for three major, interrelated theses: (1) In chapter 5, I show that the celebrated Spinozist doctrine commonly termed "the doctrine of parallelism" is in fact a conflation of *two* separate and independent doctrines of parallelism. (2) The clarification and setting apart of the two doctrines puts me in a position to present my second major thesis and address one of the most interesting and enduring problems in Spinoza's metaphysics: How can the attribute of thought be isomorphic with any other attribute and also with God himself, who has *infinitely* many attributes? In chapter 6, I present Spinoza's solution to this problem. I argue that the number and order of modes is the same in all attributes. Yet modes of thought, unlike modes of any other attribute, have an infinitely faceted internal structure so that one and the same idea represents infinitely many modes by having infinitely many facets (or aspects). (3) This new understanding of the inner structure of ideas in Spinoza leads to my third thesis, which solves another old riddle in Spinoza's metaphysics: his insistence that the human mind cannot know any of God's infinitely many attributes other than thought and extension. Following a discussion of the major ramifications

of my new interpretation and some important objections, I turn, in conclusion, to the philosophical significance of my reading. I explain why Spinoza could not embrace reductive idealism in spite of the preeminence he grants to the attribute of thought. I argue that Spinoza is a dualist—not a mind-body dualist as he is commonly conceived to be, but rather a dualist of thought and being. I suggest that Spinoza's position on the mind-body issue breaks with the traditional categories and ways of addressing the subject insofar as he grants clear primacy to thought without embracing the idealist reduction of bodies to thought.

If the chief claims presented in this book are right, they should result in a major revision of our understanding of Spinoza's metaphysics. Although the book leaves several problems open (indeed, some of these problems are presented here for the first time), it attempts to break new ground and offer a new understanding of the core of Spinoza's metaphysics. It is for the readers to judge whether, or to what extent, this attempt is capped by success.