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Dennett and Spinoza

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares Spinoza with Daniel Dennett and uncovers a number of striking parallels. Genevieve Lloyd's recent work on Spinoza reveals a picture of a philosopher that anticipated many of Dennett's later ideas. Both share a fervent opposition to Descartes' conception of mind and body and endorse a strikingly similar naturalist philosophy. It is the goal of this paper to tease out these connections and once again highlight the richness of a Spinozist lens of the world.

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1. A Tale of Two Anti-Cartesians

Genevieve Lloyd has done much to promote serious engagement with Baruch Spinoza and has demonstrated many ways in which Spinoza can inform and challenge current debates in the philosophical mainstream. In her article in this issue, Lloyd invites us to challenge the simplistic caricature of Spinoza as a paradigm 'rationalist', thus providing us with rich insights into the subtleties of Spinoza's naturalist view on minds, knowledge, and reason. This more accurate picture, however, offers a striking similarity to the work of Daniel Dennett. Indeed, Spinoza and Dennett are alike in sharing their fervent opposition to Descartes' conception of mind and body.

Lloyd [2021] herself alludes to Dennett when she suggests that a serious engagement with Spinoza might allow us to provide an alternative framing of the problem of consciousness—one that replaces the current metaphors with what Dennett [1991: 455] would describe as novel 'tools of thought'. While Lloyd [2017] has addressed the connection between Spinoza and the problem of consciousness in a previous publication, little has been made of the connection between these two Anti-Cartesian conceptions of the mind.

When it comes to the categorization of Spinoza as a rationalist it is easy to miscategorize Spinoza as a Cartesian thinker. As Lloyd elegantly argues, 'Spinoza has in many ways more in common with concerns of the present than he does with the imagined philosophical past with which he has become associated' [Lloyd 2021: 197]. Indeed, Spinoza is, unlike others at his time, a staunch naturalist. Lloyd argues that Spinoza sees bodies and minds not as 'different kinds of thing inhabiting different parts of a shared reality, within which they might causally interact' but 'different

modes of the one Substance' [ibid.: 198]. What may sound metaphysically odd has similarly been defended by Ginsburg and Jablonka [2019] who, drawing on Dennett, argue that the evolution of consciousness constitutes a new *mode of being*.

If the 'order and connection of ideas' is equivalent to the 'order and connection of things' [Spinoza 1677 (1992): 66], then any successful inquiry into the question of what should be understood as knowledge and human reasoning will fall into the domain of the natural sciences rather than mere armchair theorizing—something that is at odds with the 'rationalist' picture of Spinoza. His reasoning is, as Huebner [2011: 449] argues, explicitly reductionist, the 'causal and natural forces govern the behavior of all bodies; so, human minds are governed by the same laws that govern the mind of the snail'. It thus comes as no surprise that Spinoza predated many developments in contemporary neuroscience (see Ravven [2003a, 2003b]; Meehan [2014]). In order to understand Spinoza's philosophy, we will need to clarify how Spinoza understands knowledge, scepticism, and reason. Contrary to the rationalist depiction of Spinoza placing him next to the likes of Descartes, Lloyd [2021: 199] reveals a radical revision in how Spinoza treats these concepts, in that he 'unsettles, not just confidence in the extent of human knowledge, but also an underlying model of what it is to know at all'. Spinoza calls into question the very ('undoubtable') idea that the mind is somehow trying to grasp a reality external to itself. This echoes Dennett's criticism of the *Cartesian Theatre*. It is the 'view you arrive at when you discard Descartes' dualism but fail to discard the imagery of a central (but material) Theater' [Dennett 1991: 107]. Spinoza can thus be seen as one of the first philosophers to advocate 'embodied cognition'. Here, Lloyd reveals an interesting feature of Spinoza's philosophy: critical of Cartesian scepticism, Spinoza seeks to save objectivity from scepticism. As we shall see, his argumentative style and logic reveal a similar pattern to what Dennett [2013] calls the tools of thought or thinking.

Spinoza is one of the first philosophers to embrace the view, now popular among philosophers of science, that there is no Nagelian *view from nowhere* [Nagel 1989]. That is, there is no rational, objective, and detached perspective from which to gain certain knowledge as Descartes would have had it. Human minds are as much part of nature as anything else. Human reason for Spinoza is thus not, as Lloyd elegantly argues, a 'light reflected from a rational world', but merely 'a flickering candle in immense darkness—a mere speck, whose laws have no significance for anything beyond itself' [Lloyd 2021: 203]. Similarly to Dennett, Spinoza does not view such sobering conclusions with despair, but rather with admirable hope, however one may treat the equalization of God and nature.¹ One may thus construe Spinoza as a sort of sceptic, albeit of a very different sort than Cartesian scepticism. He denies that there is a unified account of the world, which he argues is a pernicious misconception that prevents us from truly understanding the world. Naturally, such a reading may not appeal to Spinoza scholars who emphasize Spinoza's appeal to the *sub specie aeternitatis*, which can be understood as analogous to the eternal Nagelian view from nowhere. However, something like this is similarly found in Dennett's [2017] controversial idea of free-floating rationales, which exist independently from time and an observer. As I shall show in the second part of this paper, this is a sort

¹ This suggests an interesting contrast with the more nihilistic views associated with the view from nowhere (see Nagel [1971]; Rosenberg [2011]; Veit [2018]).

of rationalism in both Dennett and Spinoza, but it is of a very anti-Cartesian sort. Here, we can elegantly follow Lloyd.

In her target article, Lloyd argues that we can gain a deeper understanding by challenging our understanding of reality through alternative ways of categorizing the world. She challenges whether our current way of conceptualizing the world is ‘fit for purpose in dealing with the “natural” world’ [Lloyd 2021: 210]. Lloyd suggests that we can follow Spinoza and take ‘a pluralistic approach to explanation without endorsing the idea that truth is merely subjective opinion’. While Spinoza himself seemed to have been influenced here by traditional monist approaches to knowledge, there is in principle no problem to embrace Lloyd’s suggestion of alternative ‘ways of thinking’ by recognizing that our initial opposition to the position may simply be due to the persistence of the ‘underlying model that is under challenge’ [ibid.]. Dennett [1989], of course, has similarly defended the idea that we can apply different ‘stances’ as tools/lenses through which we can see the natural world. Indeed, here Spinoza’s emphasis on the role of imagination is telling, since it allows the use of ‘metaphors, the analogies—and the philosophical fictions’ that are ultimately used to ‘engage with reality’ [Lloyd 2021: 209], something a reviewer of this paper adequately characterized as a very Neo-Kantian, if not quasi-Nietzschean, way of interpreting Spinoza. Reason, in Lloyd’s picture of Spinoza, is used to disambiguate the ‘fit for purpose’ of these thinking tools. These insights are astonishing, since similar pluralist conclusions have only come to be appreciated in the recent ‘perspectivism’ literature on models in the philosophy of science (see Giere [2006], Wimsatt [2007], Van Fraassen [2008], Massimi [2012], and Veit [2019, 2020, 2021]) and imaginative tools, such as fictions and metaphors, used to be disregarded (see Levy and Godfrey-Smith [2019] for a recent collection on the scientific role of imagination; also Veit and Ney [2021]). The point here is not to say that Spinoza has initiated these developments, but rather that he has foreshadowed many of the insights that are now celebrated in our field.

Dennett’s criticism of a Cartesian lack of imagination that is rampant in the philosophy of mind mirrors much of Spinoza’s opposition to Descartes. I suspect that Lloyd [2021] may note this herself when she points out that the role of metaphors and imagination have played an important argumentative role in the research on consciousness. Here, she draws explicitly on Dennett’s *Spinozist* defence of metaphors in his monograph *Consciousness Explained*:

I haven’t replaced a metaphorical theory, the Cartesian Theater, with a nonmetaphorical (‘literal, scientific’) theory. All I have done, really, is to replace one family of metaphors and images with another [. . .] It’s just a war of metaphors, you say – but metaphors are not ‘just’ metaphors; metaphors are the tools of thought. No one can think about consciousness without them, so it is important to equip yourself with the best set of tools available. Look what we have built with our tools. Could you have *imagined* it without them? [Dennett 1991: 455. Emphasis added]

The similarity in their approaches becomes more and more evident. A metaphor Spinoza uses is the *eyes of the soul*, which Lloyd argues is intended to elucidate a ‘superior kind of imagining’ [Lloyd 2021: 206] that could be understood as the construction of intuitive mental models merging deductive reasoning with the power of *imagination*. Spinoza’s interest in the science of his time suggests a much more intriguing picture than the painting of Spinoza as a ‘rationalist’ would suggest. Lloyd argues that the consciousness debate might benefit from a framing in terms of Spinoza’s unity

of attributes, and with it an alternative way of ‘formulating the “problem” of consciousness’ [ibid.: 211]. But as Ravven [2003b: 71] points out, many of his ideas are already evident in the neurosciences, such as the hypothesis that ‘[c]onscious thought arises as self-reflection on body processes and body–world interactions’. It is thus not all too surprising that we can find striking similarities between Spinoza and recent work on the evolution of minds by contemporaries such as Dennett. But as consciousness is only one of the topics in Lloyd’s target article, I will move on to her main topic: reason.

2. Strange Inversions, Reasoning, and Free-floating Rationales

In Daniel Dennett’s [2017] *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*, we encounter two strange ideas, that of ‘free-floating rationales’ and the ‘strange inversion of reasoning’. The latter, Huebner [2011] and Schliesser [2018] argue, finds its analogue in Spinoza’s argument that ‘final causes are but figments of the human imagination’ [Spinoza 1677 (1992): 59]. Dennett’s strange inversions find themselves in three important places: Hume, Darwin, and Turing. The last two, as Schliesser notes by citing the following paragraph from Dennett, contribute to a radical conceptual shift:

[A]ll the brilliance and comprehension in the world arises ultimately out of uncomprehending competences compounded over time into ever more competent – and hence comprehending – systems. This is indeed a strange inversion, overthrowing the pre-Darwinian mind-first vision of Creation with a mind-*last* vision of the eventual evolution of us, intelligent designers at long last. [Dennett 2017: 57–8; quoted in Schliesser 2018: 172–3]

This schema, as Schliesser [ibid.: 173] points out, is already present in Spinoza’s argument for his assertion that, expanding upon Schliesser’s quotation:

all final causes are nothing but human fictions. . . . I shall, however, add this: this doctrine concerning the end turns Nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect [. . .] What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect. [Spinoza 1677 (1994): 111–2]

This comes as no surprise since Spinoza similarly treats reason as something that arises for embodied minds. Here, Hume’s inversion of reasoning becomes important: what has become known as the *great propensity* of the mind ‘to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses’ [Hume 1739–40 (2003): I. iii. XIV]. These inversions, however, do not only share their ‘strangeness’ but also something Schliesser [2018] calls *Spinozistic provenance*, quoting the following passage: ‘We see, therefore, that all the notions by which ordinary people are accustomed to explain Nature are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination’ [Spinoza 1677 (1994): 114; quoted in Schliesser 2018: 175]. Bryce Huebner, commenting in Schliesser [ibid.: 178], asserts that ‘what “holds these things together is a scepticism about appeals to experienced kinds as metaphysically basic”’, a naturalist scepticism regarding human intuition. Spinoza [1677 (1994): 114–15] calls these ‘beings, not of reason, but of imagination’, which is presumably why Schliesser considers Spinoza’s basic philosophical framework a wide-reaching error theory.

While Spinoza held the image of an agential God with contempt, it is less clear whether this makes him an error theorist, rather than instead more of a revisionist. Spinoza radically revises concepts such as God, reason, nature, and morality. And

while Dennett is an atheist, his naturalism is one of a comforting sort, trying to save as much as possible from what Sellars [1963: 1–40] dubbed the *manifest image* of the world. Free will, morality, consciousness, and reason are given radically different interpretations in the Dennettian framework. While both Dennett and Spinoza have been faced with much opposition due to their apparent ‘radicalness’ and opposition to ‘common sense’, their philosophical reasoning, style, and conclusions share oddly many similarities.

Finally, it is surprising that Schliesser [2018] doesn’t see the resemblance between Dennett’s notion of *free-floating rationales* and the Spinozist suggestion that reason is found in and as part of nature rather than human minds. Dennett [2009: 10063] uses the comparison of a caddis larva food sieve and a lobster trap to illustrate that there are good, yet *unrepresented*, reasons that can come into being without any intentional designer. It is Darwin’s strange inversion of reasoning that allows us to see that natural selection itself can come upon free-floating rationales in nature: they are adaptive rationales. The use of imagination cherished by Spinoza and Dennett can help us to discover these rationales, or better ‘reverse-engineer’ them [Veit et al. 2020]. As Beeckman [2012: 28] argues, Spinoza’s work ‘counts as a coherent, comprehensive, and even visionary formulation of naturalism, before fundamental scientific research led to the discovery of evolutionary mechanisms’. Rational thinking for Spinoza can thus be seen as a bringing into line of the ideas, images, and metaphors of human minds with the substance of God/nature, which as Lloyd argues, ‘affirms reason as a superior kind of thinking’ [Lloyd 2021: 197], and is the core to Spinoza’s ‘rationalism’.

Once we swap the idea of the perfection of God [nature] with natural selection, Dennett’s and Spinoza’s thoughts on this issue become almost indistinguishable. If Spinoza had been alive around the time of Darwin’s strange inversion, he may very well, as the following passage suggests, have turned out to be a ‘prehistoric Dennett’:

when they see the structure of the human body, they are struck by foolish wonder; and because they do not know the causes of so great an art, they infer it has been constructed, not by mechanical, but by divine, or supernatural art. [Spinoza 1677 (1994): 113]

Spinoza’s recognition that ‘men judge things according to the disposition of their brain, and imagine, rather than understand them’ [*ibid.*: 114] might very well be equated with Dennett’s recognition that we can have *competence without comprehension*. If Spinoza had had access to the ingenious *inversions of reasoning* arising from Darwin and Turing, he would have been able to further expand on his ideas in a manner that may have been quite similar to what we can now observe in the work of Dennett.

3. Conclusion

Not too much should here be made of the fact that there are also various disanalogies between Spinoza and Dennett, such as the perhaps disappointing fact that Spinoza showed no interest in non-human animals (see Beeckman [2012]). Neither is the point here to argue that Dennett was influenced by Spinoza. Instead, we should follow Lloyd’s suggestion and take Spinoza seriously as inspiration, as an alternative lens on the world. The assessment of Spinoza in this reply to Lloyd is largely based on her interpretation of him, a reading that may be seen quite critically among other Spinoza scholars. Due to the tight word limit, I have largely omitted a critical

discussion of whether this characterization of Spinoza is a plausible one. But as the similarity between Spinoza and Dennett shows, many of Dennett's ideas could have followed from a Spinozist lens on the world. Spinoza was simply a pluralist ahead of the monism of his time, who tried to break the historically prevalent dichotomies in the philosophical tradition. Carlisle and Melamed [2020] similarly argue that the new-found appreciation for the work of Spinoza stems from an admiration for his 'strict naturalism, uncompromising systematicity and deep aversion towards anthropocentric illusions'. These features are also found in Dennett's scientific philosophy. Perhaps it doesn't come as much of a surprise, then, that Lloyd's analysis of Spinoza brings forth a thinker whose insights are only now coming to be fully appreciated—in the age that routinely challenges the manifest image with the tools of science.

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