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ŚAṆKARA, SPINOZA, AND ACOSMISM

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My recently completed book, *The Nondual Mind*, compares Hindu nondual philosophy to that of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.), demonstrating the similarity of Spinoza’s ideas to Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. In previous editions of *Dogma*, I published several excerpts from that book. The present article, drawn from the same book, surveys the scholarly literature comparing Śaṅkara’s Vedānta (8th century C.E.)¹ to the philosophy of Spinoza, and in that context, the article clarifies Spinoza’s view that the external world is real, an issue that has divided Vedānta scholars who have studied Spinoza. Moreover, this precise issue — the ontological status of the external world — is what most distinguishes Spinoza’s philosophy from Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, making *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism the closer comparison.

1. Studies Comparing Hindu Philosophy to Spinoza

Other writers before me have noticed the parallels between “Spinozism” — if

¹ The term “Vedānta” can refer to any philosophical system based on the Upanishads. I generally use the term to refer to Śaṅkara’s nondual interpretation of the Upanishads, but the term also includes several competing interpretations, most notably the qualified nondualism of Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 C.E.) and the dualism of Madhva (1238–1317 C.E.).

I may be allowed that sometimes mis-used term — and Eastern philosophy. Indeed, this comparison was made just two decades after Spinoza’s death, at a time when Eastern philosophy was little known (and even less understood) in the West. In 1697, Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* included an article on Spinoza that compared Spinoza’s philosophy to that of a Chinese religious sect that Bayle called “Fo.” It is unclear what particular sect Bayle had in mind. The sect seems to have practiced some variant of Chinese Buddhism, but Bayle’s purpose was not to expound the teachings of this East Asian religious denomination; rather, it was to criticize Spinoza’s philosophy for the monism it and the East Asian denomination allegedly had in common.

Like Bayle, several other philosopher’s — including several in recent times — have found close parallels between Spinoza’s nondual philosophy and Buddhism. These analyses are fascinating and informative, particularly in elaborating the problem of ethical duty in a monistic system. Buddhist philosophy is, however, beyond the scope of the present article. Rather, the focus of this article is the parallel between Spinoza’s nondual philosophy and Hindu nondualism, a comparison that I find particularly fruitful.

In the mid-19th century, Sanskrit scholar Theodore Goldstücker recognized the close parallel between Spinoza's philosophical system and Hindu Vedānta, saying, "[H]ad Spinoza been a Hindu, his system would in all probability mark a last phase of the Vedānta philosophy."² In support of this assertion, Goldstücker relied on the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza put forward by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831 C.E.).³ As will become clear, I do not embrace Hegel's assertion that Spinoza was an acosmist, but Goldstücker correctly observed that some of the criticisms that have been directed at Vedānta can also be said of Spinoza's system.

Another prominent 19th century Sanskrit scholar, Friedrich Max Müller, noticed the same resemblance between Vedānta and Spinoza's philosophy. Müller was not only one of the most esteemed Indologists of his time, but he had also completed a dissertation on Spinoza's *Ethics*, so he was well qualified to compare the two systems. In lectures on Vedānta

delivered at the Royal Institution in 1894, Müller briefly pointed out the similarities that he thought were most significant.⁴ In particular, Müller noted the similarity between Vedānta's "Brahman" (God) and Spinoza's infinite and eternal divine "substance" (*substantia*).

Sir Monier Monier-Williams — Müller's rival in the 1860 election for Oxford's Boden Professor of Sanskrit — agreed with his colleague about the similarity between Vedānta and Spinozism. Monier-Williams even boldly asserted that "the Hindus were Spinozites more than 2,000 years before the existence of Spinoza."⁵ What he meant, presumably, was that he saw in the Sanskrit classical works a foreshadowing of the same ideas that Spinoza would articulate in Western philosophical terms more than two millennia later. And in the years since Monier-Williams's provocative comment, many scholars have tried to flesh out the details of his assertion.

If one studies this scholarly corpus, one observes a tendency to distort Spinoza's theories in an effort to make Spinoza seem either more or less Hindu, depending on the scholar's personal bias. Ironically, however, I find these distortions very valuable and informative. They tend to reveal the areas in which Spinoza's philosophy is most often misunderstood and most hotly contested, and by comparing Hindu approaches to the same philosophical problems, we are led to a deeper understanding of Spinoza. Does Spinoza contend

2 Goldstücker, Theodore, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Theodore Goldstücker*, vol. II (W.H. Allen & Co. 1879), p. 33.

3 As Yitzhak Melamed has shown, Hegel was not the first to characterize Spinoza as an acosmist, although Hegel certainly did much to reinforce that characterization. The idea was already put forward by the German philosopher Ernst Platner in 1776, who said: "Spinoza does not actually deny the existence of the Godhead, but rather the existence of the world." The specific expression "acosmism" in relation to Spinoza's philosophy derives from Solomon Maimon's writings, which Hegel probably read. On this topic, see Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2004), pp. 76–79. See also Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Why Spinoza is Not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists)," in Goff, Philip (ed.), *Spinoza on Monism* (Palgrave 2011), pp. 210–211.

4 Müller, Friedrich Max, "Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy Delivered at the Royal Institution in March, 1894," in *Collected Works of the Right Hon. F. Max Müller*, vol. XVI (Longmans, Green, and Co. 1904), pp. 123–126.

5 Monier-Williams, Monier, *Brahmanism and Hinduism: Religious Thought and Life in India, as Based on the Veda and Other Sacred Books of the Hindus* (John Murray, 4th edition, 1891), p. xii.

that thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are merely subjective ascriptions superimposed on divine substance (*substantia*)? Or, does Spinoza contend that thought and extension are objective realities? Is Spinoza an acosmist? Is he a covert idealist? And most importantly, who is asking the question — a mind or a brain? This article will give the answers.

We begin with Maganlal Amritlal Buch, who was a professor of philosophy at Baroda College in Gujarat, India. In 1921, Buch published a book aimed at popularizing the teachings of Vedānta, and in particular those of Śāṅkara (8th century C.E.), and he included a brief section comparing Vedānta to Spinoza's philosophy.⁶ The discussion does not go into depth, but it is one of the first systematic efforts to compare Śāṅkara's Vedānta to Spinozism, and it identifies several of the more obvious similarities. Among other things, Buch notes that Spinoza's divine "substance" (*substantia*) corresponds to Śāṅkara's "Brahman," each being the totality of all existence, and each being conceived only through itself. In addition, both philosophers assert (1) that the source of evil and unhappiness is not desire ("wrong willing") but ignorance ("wrong knowing"); (2) that the world is law-bound, and absolute free will is illusory; (3) that true freedom lies in knowing that the body, mind, intellect, and ego are not who or what one really is; and (4) that God is the cause of all things, although not a transitive cause.

In addition, Buch addresses Spinoza's theory that thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are different "attributes" of — different ways of comprehending — the divine "substance." Adopting a subjective interpretation of the "attributes," Buch argues that in Spinoza's system, as in

6 Buch, Maganlal Amritlal, *The Philosophy of Shankara* (A.G. Widgery 1921), pp. 198–206.

Śāṅkara's, the differentiated world of finite subjects and objects is only something we *ascribe* to God's being; it is not itself real.⁷ Here, Buch's reading of Spinoza, like that of Goldstücker and others, makes the world into a figment of the human imagination, effectively prioritizing the attribute of thought over the attribute extension. Doing so, however, ignores the fact that Spinoza gave equal ontological status to both thought and extension, refusing to reduce one to the other.

Another relatively early comparison of Vedānta to Spinoza's philosophy is *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, which was Mahadev Sakharam Modak's 1928 doctoral thesis at the University of London. Modak's dissertation is well researched and analytically thoughtful. Modak asserts that in both philosophical systems, consciousness is treated as self-evident,⁸ and knowledge of God is in some sense the same as unity with God.⁹ Also, both systems recognize three grades of knowledge, although Śāṅkara rejects rational analysis as a means of knowing ultimate reality (i.e., God). Modak argues that for Śāṅkara, in contrast to Spinoza, knowledge of God is super-rational, not an outgrowth of rational inquiry.¹⁰

Modak next discusses Spinoza's answer to the mind-body problem¹¹ and the corresponding mind-body theories of the Upanishads.¹² Modak notes that both philosophical systems make metaphysics their starting point, and both teach spe-

7 Buch, *The Philosophy of Shankara*, pp. 201–203.

8 Modak, M.S., *Spinoza and the Upanishads: A Comparative Study* (Nagpur Vidyapeeth Mudranalaya 1970), pp. 6–9.

9 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 14–16.

10 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 10, 18–23, 118.

11 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 24–43.

12 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 43–54.

cific methods for gaining peace of mind. In addition, both systems argue that knowledge leads to freedom. Modak also notes that Spinoza rejects Cartesian “seat of the soul” theories (i.e., the theory that the soul is an independent entity localized somewhere in the brain), and likewise the Upanishads sometimes speak of the soul as being the equivalent of infinite space, although the Upanishads are not consistent in that regard.¹³

One of Modak’s primary points is that Spinoza’s God is distinguishable from the Upanishads’ “Brahman” because Spinoza’s God is not different from the cosmic system itself, whereas Brahman, although being the ontological basis of the physical universe, transcends it and remains distinct from it.¹⁴ In other words, Brahman is the cause of the world, but Brahman (the cause) does not lose itself in the effect (the world).¹⁵ Rather, the world is Brahman’s *māyā*, which Modak prefers to translate as “powers,” not as “illusion.” Modak denies that, according to Upanishadic thought, the world is completely unreal; instead, he argues that the world has a relative reality, dependent on Brahman while not being necessary or essential to Brahman. It is the latter point that, according to Modak, distinguishes Brahman from Spinoza’s God, since for Spinoza the world is a necessary expression of God’s own essence.¹⁶ Of course, in this regard, Spinoza’s philosophy aligns with *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, a point my previous articles for *Dogma* explain in detail.¹⁷

13 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 54–60.

14 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 63–69.

15 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 76–77.

16 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 73–77, 81–83. See also *id.*, p. 19 [noting that Upanishadic thought distinguishes between empirical existence (*vyāvahārika*) and illusion (*prātibhāsika*)].

17 See, e.g., Cumming, James H., “Hindu Non-dual Philosophy, Spinoza, and the Mind-Body

Modak next notes that the Upanishads and Spinoza are similar in regard to ethical philosophy. In both systems, ethical precepts are valid relative to the human experience. Ethical behavior leads in Spinoza’s philosophy to the intellectual love of God, and it leads in Vedānta to self-realization. Both systems also emphasize rational self-control, and both systems prioritize rational self-control over excessive renunciation. In addition, according to both systems, the “self” that the practitioner hopes to realize or actualize is the idealized self whose thoughts correspond to God’s own thoughts. Hence, the goal of self-realization or self-actualization is not a *selfish* goal; rather, it is a *selfless* goal.¹⁸

Modak also points out that the Upanishads and Spinoza are similar in their attitude toward theistic religion. Devotional scriptures are the work of human hands, albeit inspired by God, and their primary function is to teach and inspire good conduct. In both systems, however, the pursuit of truth is given greater emphasis, and knowledge of God (described as identity with God, or the intellectual love of God) is considered the highest stage of religious experience.¹⁹

In summary, the primary distinction that Modak identifies between the two philosophical systems is that according to the Upanishads, Brahman is a transcendent cause of the world, whereas according to Spinoza, God is an imminent cause of the world. In the former case, the existence of the world depends on Brahman but has no *effect* on Brahman, whereas in the latter case, the existence of the world not only depends on God, but it also *expresses* and

Problem,” in *DOGMA, Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, Édition No. 19, printemps 2022, pp. 20–48.

18 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 84–104.

19 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 105–113.

characterizes God.²⁰ Modak's dissertation is the first scholarly in-depth comparison between the philosophy of the Upanishads and that of Spinoza, and it remains a valuable resource.

Among the more superficial comparisons between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophy of the East is Samuel Max Melamed's 1933 book entitled *Spinoza and Buddha: Visions of a Dead God*. S.M. Melamed's book is more an expression of Jewish pride than it is a work of serious scholarship. His facts are sometimes inaccurate, his argument is sometimes inconsistent, and he punctuates his analysis with so much generalization, stereotype, and outright bigotry that it is hard to take the work seriously. For example, in the opening portion of a section entitled "The Man and His Race," S.M. Melamed has this to say:

All of white man's culture can be divided into two categories, two types, one which is born of the ear and the other of the eye. [¶] . . . Semitic culture is that of the ear, while Aryan culture is that of the eye. All myth, like all plastic arts [(i.e., sculpting, molding, etc.)], originates in vision. Hence Semitic culture is without a mythology, without a pantheon, and without a plastic art. . . . Aryan culture, on the other hand, is overwhelmed with myth, populated with gods and goddesses, and saturated with plastic art.²¹

20 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 114–118. It is worth contrasting Modak's interpretation of Spinoza to that of Maganlal Buch, described above. As noted, Buch interpreted Spinoza as saying that the differentiated world of finite subjects and objects is only something that the human intellect *ascribes* to God's being — it is not itself real. Modak interprets Spinoza as holding that the world is real and that as such, it tells us something about the nature of God, its cause.

21 Melamed, Samuel Max, *Spinoza and Bud-*

Continuing the same theme, we next encounter this observation:

The stone knows no fear [(i.e., awe)]. Plants already have an inkling of fear, while the animal is positively fearful. Only the stupid is fearless. The higher the intelligence, the greater the fear [(i.e., awe)]. Love, however, has nothing to do with intelligence. . . . The Jew says 'fear' [(i.e., awe)] because he is a rationalist, an incorrigible intellectualist. The Aryan says 'love' because he is an incorrigible emotionalist.²²

Later in his book, S.M. Melamed turns his critical eye to Hinduism and Buddhism, which he treats as more or less equivalent, setting forth a race-based theory of intellectual achievement that elevates "Aryans" and "Jews" above other peoples. He says:

Long before the Aryans invaded [India] from the northwest, the Ganges land was populated by a variety of tribes. [But o]nly with the appearance of the Aryan invaders did a culture grow out of the Indian soil. In Palestine a similar phenomenon can be observed. Many tribes and races inhabited the country prior to the coming and after the going of the Jews from that land. However, Palestine's fame and position in history as the land which gave birth to two great religions were determined not by the Canaanites or Moabites, but by the Hebrews.²³

But lest we think that India's "Aryans" are the Jews' equal, S.M. Melamed goes on to explain that "the Aryan invaders of India surrendered their physical energy, virility, and aggressiveness in that tropic

dha: Visions of a Dead God (Univ. of Chicago Press 1933), p. 118.

22 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 121.

23 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 235.

land,”²⁴ and he describes them as a “tropical people made indolent by a tropical heat.”²⁵ He adds:

Just as no sweeping revolutionary movement ever arose in ancient India, so was no scientific discovery of any magnitude ever made in that land. Political revolutions require energy and interest in the state and in man, while scientific inventions require curiosity. The ancient Hindu lacked these qualifications.²⁶

By contrast, the “Western Aryans” were not, in his view, so environmentally debilitated:

The Western Aryans were more fortunate in selecting lands of temperate climates for their dwelling-places. Their bodies were not weakened by a tropical sun and their will to live was not undermined by a fever-infested jungle. Their gods were not only living but actually frolicking.²⁷

S.M. Melamed’s book is full of such commentary from beginning to end. But the passage just quoted, which mentions that the gods of the West are “living,” provides a good example of one of S.M. Melamed’s primary themes, a theme that is also captured in the book’s subtitle *Visions of a Dead God*. S.M. Melamed argues that the God of Spinoza, like the God of Eastern philosophical thought, is unified with nature, bound by the laws of physics, and therefore “dead,” whereas the God of the West, and in particular the God of Judaism, is separate from nature, free, and therefore “living.” He says: “The

24 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 236–237. See also *id.*, p. 10.

25 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 238.

26 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 238.

27 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 248.

God of Eastern Aryan religiosity is a dead God within a bad world; the God of the Old Testament is a living God outside of a good world.”²⁸ In the background of this argument is a criticism of Spinoza’s philosophy that goes back to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716 C.E.) and before. Many of Spinoza’s detractors — S.M. Melamed included — cannot imagine a God that exists *outside time*. For them, God must be an actor on the stage of time, which of course is what they imagine themselves to be. Therefore, they see Spinoza’s God as powerless, even dead. This point is elaborated in my article entitled “Freedom in a Deterministic Universe.”²⁹ Here, it is enough to note that S.M. Melamed prefers to perpetuate cultural stereotypes than to do the philosophical “heavy-lifting” that is necessary to address the metaphysical problems that Spinoza and Eastern philosophy address.

But S.M. Melamed’s cultural chauvinism could be tolerated if his scholarship were otherwise sound. Hence, what is most dissatisfying about S.M. Melamed’s book is its superficiality. He doesn’t bother to demonstrate his pronouncements about Spinoza or the East with careful textual analysis. Instead, he relies on generalizations, clichés, and distortions.³⁰ For example, S.M. Melamed treats all Eastern philosophy (both Hindu and Buddhist) as if it were a single system. Indeed, he even uses the name “Buddha” and the word “Buddhism” as metonyms for Eastern thought in general and, more broadly, for pantheism, asceticism, and mysticism

28 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 286.

29 See Cumming, James H., “Freedom in a Deterministic Universe,” in *DOGMA, Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, Édition No. 21, Automne 2022, pp. 145–149.

30 See, e.g., Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 251–275.

wherever those forms of religiosity are found. Most significantly, S.M. Melamed has no awareness of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, which more than any other school of Hindu thought resembles Spinoza's system.

The core thesis of S.M. Melamed's book is that Eastern pantheism implies a God that is bound by physical laws, which leads, for human beings, to a crisis of despair, pessimism, and hopelessness, and that crisis, in turn, leads to disengagement from public affairs (i.e., passivity and quietism), monastic asceticism, and a foolish desire to lose oneself in God. S.M. Melamed says:

The personal, living God of the Bible is only a correlation to its living, passionate, and powerful man. The universal and dead God of the Upanishads is equal in reality to its dead universalism. Out of the jungle [of South Asia] crawled a dead God, and out of the desert [of the Levant] roared a living God. [¶] The religious history of Western man is, in the final analysis, the history of a struggle between the living Jehovah and the dead Brahma[n].³¹

S.M. Melamed asserts that in ancient times, this flawed Eastern philosophy gained a foothold in the West, influencing Western thinkers such as Paul of Tarsus (1st century C.E.) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430 C.E.), and in S.M. Melamed's view, Spinoza's philosophy represents the intellectual culmination of that trend (and a betrayal of the world-affirming Jewish tradition that was Spinoza's birthright). S.M. Melamed therefore describes Spinoza as "the last tremor of Buddhism in the Western world,"³² meaning not actual Buddhism so much as its "basic driving

forces in the realm of the spirit."³³ But in making this argument, S.M. Melamed presents a highly distorted understanding of Spinoza, mistakenly treating him as an acosmist who viewed "the world [as] a phantom *sans* reality."³⁴ Moreover, because S.M. Melamed is ignorant of the world-affirming, life-affirming teachings of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, his presentation of Eastern philosophy is equally distorted and mistaken.

Ultimately, S.M. Melamed is more a cultural commentator than he is a scholar. Moreover, he is a cultural commentator who takes great satisfaction in his own Jewish heritage, urging an assertive and confident world-engagement that suited his role, from 1921 to 1924, as the head of the Chicago branch of the Zionist Organization of America. S.M. Melamed's message, which told his Jewish readers to be activists, not fatalists; courageous, not despairing; and individualistic, not universalistic, was an important one for his day, and understood in those terms, his book is a work of prescient genius, but understood as a work of scholarship, it is too superficial and biased to significantly advance our understanding of the parallels between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophies of the East.

At about the same time as the publication of S.M. Melamed's book, Kurt F. Leidecker wrote a 1934 article for *The Open Court*, comparing Spinoza's philosophy to Śaṅkara's Vedānta.³⁵ Leidecker does not undertake a detailed, text-based analysis of either Vedānta or Spinozism, instead merely pointing out the most obvious points of similarity between the two systems, but his insights are none-

31 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 11–12.

32 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. viii.

33 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 1–2.

34 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 214.

35 Leidecker, Kurt F., "Spinoza and Hinduism," in *The Open Court*, vol. 48, no. 931 (1934).

theless informative. Leidecker argues that in each system: (1) God is the eternal, self-caused, infinite existence underlying all things (“infinite” in the sense of being independent and unconstrained); (2) God is beyond human categories of good and evil; (3) world-creation does not give rise to something separate from God; (4) the consciousness of the individual soul is God’s own consciousness; (5) the human mind has access to three types of knowledge, one based on inference, another based on reason, and a third based on direct knowledge of God’s essence; and (6) true knowledge leads to human perfection and enduring joy (*laetitia*) or bliss (*ānanda*). Leidecker’s brief article is valuable, but it merely whets the appetite for a more probing analysis.

A third book-length comparison of Hindu philosophy to that of Spinoza is *Spinoza in the Light of the Vedānta* by Rama Kanta Tripathi, published in 1957. The book is primarily an explication of Spinoza’s philosophical system, but Tripathi points out, throughout his analysis, the places where similar ideas appear in Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. The result is a fascinating comparison that serves to make Spinoza accessible to readers who are accustomed to thinking in Vedāntic categories.

Tripathi identifies all the most obvious parallels between Śaṅkara’s Vedānta and Spinozism, such as (1) the similarity of Śaṅkara’s “Brahman” to Spinoza’s divine “substance” (*substantia*), (2) the unity of all things in God’s own infinite being, (3) the pursuit of human self-perfection through the cultivation of reason over passion, and (4) the attainment of liberation or blessedness by means of true knowledge — that is, knowledge of things *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under a species of eternity”). But Tripathi also takes liberties with Spinoza’s ideas, using his explication of Spinoza’s

philosophy as a vehicle for championing the genius of Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. As Tripathi’s editor concedes, Tripathi’s book is “an emendation of Spinoza in the light of Śaṅkara.”³⁶ In other words, Tripathi’s purpose is, in part, to improve upon Spinoza’s philosophy by interpreting it through a Vedāntic lens. It is Tripathi’s assertion that Vedānta reconciles the most problematic parts of Spinoza’s system and that Westerners misunderstand Spinoza because they are not accustomed to certain counterintuitive ideas that are well developed in Vedānta.

There may be some validity to the latter assertion. If Spinoza’s philosophy is similar in many ways to the leading philosophies of Hindu India — and I think it is — then it follows that Hindus might have easier access to some of Spinoza’s ideas than do Westerners. It is perhaps difficult for Westerners, who are generally accustomed to thinking empirically, to imagine that the subject-object divide is merely an illusion or that mind and matter are the same thing comprehended in two different ways. By contrast, those notions are much less alien to the well-educated Hindu, for they are central to the Hindu religious discussion. Indeed, Tripathi argues that much of the criticism of Spinoza’s philosophy can be traced to the inability of Spinoza’s critics to think in non-empirical terms.³⁷

But Tripathi, in his effort to explain Spinoza’s system in light of Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, reconfigures the former to fit the latter. He asserts that Vedānta — and in particular Śaṅkara’s doctrine of world-illusion (*māyāvāda*, or *vivartavāda*) — is the key that makes sense of Spinoza’s metaphysics,

36 Tripathi, Rama Kanta, *Spinoza in the Light of the Vedānta* (Banaras Hindu Univ. Press 1957), p. i.

37 Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. iv–v, 172, 312.

and he further asserts that this acosmist emendation of Spinoza's philosophy is implied in everything Spinoza states explicitly.

As to the latter point, Tripathi makes two interrelated arguments.³⁸ First, he adopts the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of Spinoza's divine substance, meaning that the categories of "thought" and "extension" (i.e., mind and matter) are, according to Tripathi's interpretation of Spinoza, merely things we *ascribe* to the infinite being of God; they are not actually real or existent in themselves. As Tripathi puts it, their basis is epistemological, not ontological. Thus, Tripathi reads Spinoza as holding that the world, in both its mental and material aspects, is a false appearance (*māyā*). Second, Tripathi relies heavily on Spinoza's assertion that "all determination is negation" (*omnis determinatio est negatio*).³⁹ Following Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

38 For Tripathi's presentation of these arguments, see, e.g., Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. v–vi, 65–66, 68–73, 89, 92, 113, 121, 122–129, 134, 154–160, 184–188, 197–200, 203–208, 211–216, 314–322.

39 To better understand Spinoza's assertion, one should consider it in its context. Spinoza says: "As for shape being a negation, and not something positive, it's manifest that matter as a whole, considered without limitation, can have no shape, and that shape pertains only to finite and determinate bodies. For whoever says that he conceives a shape indicates nothing by this except that he conceives a determinate thing, and how it is determinate. So this determination does not pertain to the thing according to its being, but on the contrary, it is its non-being. Therefore, because the shape is nothing but a determination, and a *determination is a negation*, as they say, it can't be anything but a negation." Letter 50 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/240b/25–35], italics added. The translations of Spinoza's writings that appear in this article are from Curley, Edwin (ed. and transl.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. I & II (Princeton Univ. Press 1988 and

Hegel (1770–1831 C.E.), Tripathi derives from this principle that anything that is finite exists only as a selective negation of God's infinite presence, and therefore only God's infinite presence is real, not the finite object that one might be observing. In my view, which follows that of Yitzhak Melamed (no relation to S.M. Melamed), the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza is flawed,⁴⁰ but Tripathi relies on it to conclude that Spinoza's God, like Śaṅkara's Brahman, is a God relative to which all things are unreal. In this regard, Tripathi follows the lead of Theodore Goldstücker and Maganlal Buch.

In making these arguments, Tripathi embraces a qualified version of subjective idealism,⁴¹ and he overlooks the non-reductive aspect of Spinoza's philosophical system. For Spinoza, "a mode of extension" (i.e., a distinct material object) is just as real as "the idea of that mode" (i.e., the thought that corresponds to that object),

2016), sometimes with minor edits.

40 See Melamed, Yitzhak Y., " 'Omnis determinatio est negatio': Determination, negation, and self-negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel," in Förster, Eckart, and Yitzhak Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2012), pp. 184–196. See also Melamed, "Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism," pp. 76–79, 86. When Tripathi describes God as infinite, he means the absence of defining characteristics. But when Spinoza describes God as infinite, he means that God is not constrained or determined by anything *external to God*, and therefore that nothing impedes God's expression of God's own essence. Importantly, in Spinoza's use of the term "infinite," God has discernible characteristics.

41 Tripathi argues that there is an aspect of God called "Īśvara" that mediates between the "supreme reality" (*paramārthika*) and the practical world of diverse phenomena (*vyavahārika*), and Tripathi asserts that the finite things that make up the practical world are the dream images of Īśvara. See Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. 158–159, 188–192.

and neither can be eliminated in favor of the other. Thus, Spinoza rejects subjective idealism. But Tripathi — whose admiration for Spinoza is beyond question — prefers to repair Spinoza’s philosophy by conforming it to Śaṅkara’s Vedānta rather than to repair Śaṅkara’s Vedānta by conforming it to Spinoza. In contrast to S.M. Melamed, Tripathi has a profound grasp of and appreciation for Spinoza’s ideas, but in the end, Tripathi loves his Vedānta as much as S.M. Melamed loves his Judaism. As a result, Tripathi’s contribution to our understanding of Spinoza’s metaphysics, although valuable, is incomplete.

More recently, there has been renewed interest in the similarities between Hindu philosophy and that of Spinoza. In 1984, Bina Gupta wrote a thoughtful article for the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, comparing Śaṅkara’s “Brahman” to Spinoza’s divine “substance” (*substantia*). Gupta notes that both entities are defined as eternal, self-caused, infinite existence, constrained by nothing and dependent on nothing.⁴² But Gupta also identifies the key distinction between the two. She notes that in Spinoza’s system, the differentiated world of finite things is objectively real. It is a necessary expression of the divine substance, and in that sense, it tells us something about the innermost nature of the divine substance. For Śaṅkara, by contrast, the world is a mere appearance — a false interpretation that we superimpose on Brahman. In Śaṅkara’s system, the world is real only insofar as it is understood to be Brahman; it is a mere phantasm insofar as it is understood to be the world. Moreover, people who, through their ignorance, take the world to be real turn Brahman into a

42 Gupta, Bina, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature: Samkara and Spinoza,” in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XI, no. 3 (1984), pp. 272, 281–282.

finite god of religious devotion. In truth, no qualities characterize or can be ascribed to Brahman.⁴³

Gupta readily concedes several general correspondences between the philosophies of Śaṅkara and Spinoza. For example, both philosophers recognize three means of acquiring knowledge, and for both, freedom is achieved through the highest of these means, an intuitive knowledge of God’s essence.⁴⁴ Also, both philosophers claim that human beings lack free will. Instead, human beings imagine themselves to be free because they do not know the causes of their desires.⁴⁵ But Gupta sees a distinction in how the two philosophies characterize the outcome of the philosopher’s quest. The highest goal for Spinoza is the ability to view all things “under a species of eternity,” understanding all things as God understands them. For Śaṅkara, by contrast, true knowledge leads to the awareness that the world is an illusion.⁴⁶

As Gupta points out, Śaṅkara’s doctrine of world illusion (*māyāvāda*) allows Brahman, the underlying cause of the world, to remain indeterminate, having no form and undergoing no modifications. By contrast, Spinoza’s divine substance expresses its own eternal essence through temporal modifications that are real, thus giving rise to a real world, but by the same token, giving content to God’s own being.⁴⁷ Gupta comments on the significance of this distinction, saying:

43 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 272–276.

44 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 276–278.

45 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” p. 279.

46 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 278–281.

47 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” p. 281.

The intuitive knowledge of God which Spinoza seeks is a way to understand the world as it really is. It is not a flight from the material world, but a celebration of its essential nature and oneness. The pursuit of Brahman, on the other hand, implies repudiation of the world: it is a realization that Brahman is the only reality; the world is merely an appearance and the [individual soul] and Brahman are non-different.⁴⁸

Here, of course, Gupta rejects the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza put forward by Hegel, Goldstücker, Buch, Tripathi, and many others. Moreover, Gupta has focused our attention on the precise point that makes *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, not Śaṅkara's Vedānta, the closer analog to Spinoza's metaphysics.

A year later, in 1985, Abhedā Nanda Bhattacharya published a short book entitled *The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā*. His book relies mostly on secondary sources, and it includes almost no comparative analysis of the two philosophies. Instead, the book summarizes Śaṅkara's Vedānta (in about 70 pages), and then it separately summarizes Spinoza's philosophy (in about 36 pages), leaving it mostly to the reader to identify similarities and differences. Bhattacharya does, however, end each of his summaries with a section entitled "Critical Estimate" in which he expresses his own views about each philosophy. Notably, in these sections, he doesn't attempt to hide his admiration for Śaṅkara's philosophy, nor does he shy from highlighting what he deems to be the flaws in Spinoza's system.

Bhattacharya is particularly sensitive to the charge that, according to Śaṅkara, the objective world is a mere illusion, and

48 Gupta, "Brahman, God, Substance and Nature," p. 281.

Bhattacharya devotes considerable energy to refuting that charge. His main point is that the world is not an illusion in the sense of being nonexistent; rather, the world is a misapprehension of the facts. The cause of the world is Brahman, but the cause (i.e., Brahman) never actually undergoes any change or transformation, and thus the effect (i.e., the world) never actually occurs. What appears as the world is actually just Brahman, as when a coiled rope appears to be a snake.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, consistent with Śaṅkara's teaching, Bhattacharya readily concedes that the world has a practical significance that makes it more real than a mere dream image. According to Bhattacharya, Śaṅkara's Vedānta is not subjective idealism, and it does not abandon consciousness-matter dualism: Something "external" exists as the object of consciousness, but that something is not what we imagine it to be.⁵⁰

With regard to Spinoza's philosophy, Bhattacharya rejects the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of divine "substance" (*substantia*), thus disagreeing with Buch and Tripathi's acosmist interpretation of Spinoza. Instead, Bhattacharya concludes that the attributes of Spinoza's divine substance are ontologically real, multiplying God's being. Moreover, because God's attributes are infinite in number, whereas human beings are only capable of conceiving two of those attributes (thought and extension), Bhattacharya argues that God, for Spinoza, is transcendent and unknowable.⁵¹ Taking

49 Bhattacharya, Abhedā Nanda, *The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā: Some Typical Problems of Idealism of the Two Philosophers* (Durga Publications 1985), pp. 4, 23–25.

50 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 30, 82.

51 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 103–104.

the point a step further, Bhattacharya finds here an inconsistency in Spinoza's philosophy. As Bhattacharya puts it, Spinoza begins his philosophy as a pantheist (i.e., nature and God are the same thing), but he ends his philosophy as a theist (i.e., God is infinitely greater than nature, the latter being incomplete and hence imperfect).⁵²

As regards the reality of the physical world, Bhattacharya notes that, for Spinoza, thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) have coequal status. Neither is reducible to the other, and neither can influence the other causally. But Bhattacharya finds an inconsistency in the fact that Spinoza also describes thought and extension as conceptions of the human intellect, which is itself a *thinking* thing. Bhattacharya argues that thought thus "has a double function"; it is, on the one hand, a parallel attribute to the attribute of extension, and it is, on the other hand, the thinking subject that perceives the two attributes of thought and extension. Bhattacharya therefore concludes that Spinoza's theory of thought-matter equivalence, which claims to be a response to Cartesian dualism, is merely Cartesian dualism in a different form.⁵³ Of course, Bhattacharya is not the first to notice this particular peculiarity of Spinoza's philosophy, and although Bhattacharya doesn't make the point explicitly, he implies by the title of his book (*The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā*) that for Spinoza, thought is everything, and matter (i.e., extension) — even if it is non-eliminable — is ultimately just a concept held by the intellect. Here, I think Bhattacharya misreads Spinoza, a point this article explains in section 2, below.

52 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 98–102, 106–110, 113, 116–117.

53 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 105–106.

Bhattacharya's book includes some important insights, but it fails to undertake a deep analysis of the primary sources. As a result, Bhattacharya's defense of Śaṅkara's Vedānta lacks analytical rigor, and his critique of Spinoza, although valid in part, makes interpretive errors. For example, Bhattacharya takes a misstep, I think, when he argues that all nondualist philosophies need to bridge the gap between the "absolute" (i.e., Śaṅkara's "Brahman" or Spinoza's "substance"), which is infinite and perfect, and the external world, which is finite and imperfect.⁵⁴ Spinoza would not agree that the world is finite; rather, human beings divide it into finite parts. Nor would Spinoza agree that the world is in any sense imperfect, evil, or sinful; rather, moralistic judgments and ethical categories are, for Spinoza, valid only in relation to human needs. (See, e.g., *Ethics*, III, Preface.) Therefore, for Spinoza, there is no gap to bridge between God and the world, and Spinoza, unlike Śaṅkara, has no need to declare the world false or to deny the reality of causal transformation. In the end, the greatest contribution of Bhattacharya's monograph may be that it forces us to think deeply about the irregularities and inconsistencies that lurk within both Śaṅkara's Vedānta and Spinoza's monism, asking ourselves, as to each system, whether those irregularities and inconsistencies can be reconciled.

In 2014, William Néria published a book entitled *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza: Le dépassement de la raison et l'expérience de l'Absolu*. As the title suggests, Néria compares the philosophies of Plotinus (204/5–270 C.E.), Śaṅkara, and Spinoza. With respect to each philosophy, Néria first examines the individuation process

54 See, e.g., Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 15, 26–27, 98–102, 108, 113, 116–117, 125–126.

that gives rise to the ego-sense. Next, he considers the role played by the intellect in overcoming that individuation. And finally, he describes the state of a person who has merged his or her individuality into the “Absolute.”

Because Néria is attempting a three-way comparison among philosophies that emerged in different cultural settings and that use words in different ways, his task is a formidable one. Nonetheless, Néria’s approach is careful and scholarly, and his insights are brilliant. His primary point is that all three philosophies begin with a “prime intuition,” a common “anchor point” that is more experiential than it is philosophical.⁵⁵ From there, all three philosophies validate the use of the intellect, but they also ask the seeker to go beyond mere reason to a higher form of knowing that eliminates the subject-object divide. That higher form of knowing leads to eternal serenity, unaffected by the extremes of desire and aversion.⁵⁶

Although Néria’s book is the most recent in-depth treatment of our subject, scholars have continued to be fascinated by the similarities between the philosophical systems of Śaṅkara and Spinoza. In 2016, Shakuntala Gawde wrote a brief article emphasizing the need for global intercultural harmony.⁵⁷ Like other scholars before her, she identifies the following points of similarity between Śaṅkara’s Vedānta and Spinoza’s philosophical system: (1) God is one, infinite, indivisible, unchanging, and the underlying being of all things; (2) God

does not interfere in human affairs, which are instead dictated by the law of cause-and-effect; (3) the consciousness of the human soul is God’s own consciousness; (4) the appearance of diversity (i.e., *māyā* according to Vedānta, the “attributes and modes” according to Spinoza) is merely a subjective ascription, not real; and (5) true knowledge leads to human perfection and joy.⁵⁸

As point (4) in this brief summary shows, Gawde embraces the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza, agreeing with Buch, Tripathi, and others holding a similar view.⁵⁹ Of course, the acosmist interpretation tends to align Spinoza’s system more closely with Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, but as already said, it overlooks the fact that for Spinoza, the material world is quite real, thus making *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism the closer comparison.

Michael Hemmingsen wrote an article in 2018 that focuses directly on the question of acosmism in Spinoza’s philosophy, a question that, as we have seen, is critical to any effort to align Spinoza’s philosophy with that of Śaṅkara.⁶⁰ Hemmingsen’s

55 Néria, William, *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza: Le dépassement de la raison et L’expérience de l’Absolu* (Les Deux Océans 2014), p. 19.

56 Néria, *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza*, pp. 167–170, 209–212.

57 Gawde, Shakuntala, “Monism of Śaṅkara and Spinoza – a Comparative Study,” in *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol. 4, no. 3 (July–Sept. 2016), pp. 483–489.

58 In 2018, two years after Gawde’s article, Urmi Ray published a brief article that makes similar points. See Ray, Urmi, “Advaitavada versus Spinoza’s Monism,” in *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, no. 7 (July 2018), pp. 610–614. In addition to those points, Ray’s article also considers (1) the temporality of the differentiated world (*id.*, pp. 611–612), (2) the transcendent unknowability of God (*id.*, p. 612), and (3) God’s lack of purpose other than sport or joy (*id.*, pp. 613–614). Like Gawde, Ray uses her comparative analysis as a basis for urging harmony in human relations.

59 Gawde, “Monism of Śaṅkara and Spinoza,” p. 486.

60 Hemmingsen, Michael, “Māyā and Becoming: Deleuze and Vedānta on Attributes, Acosmism, and Parallelism in Spinoza,” in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 3 (June 2018), pp. 238–250.

article contrasts Tripathi's interpretation of Spinoza with Gilles Deleuze's alternative interpretation. Tripathi — who seeks to emend Spinoza's philosophy in light of Śāṅkara's Vedānta — embraces the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of divine "substance," arguing that the attributes are mere ascriptions that we superimpose on divine substance and that divine substance is ultimately unknowable and transcendent (i.e., not subject to any differentiation or determination). By contrast, Deleuze is one of the philosophers who reject the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophical system, arguing that Spinoza's divine substance is expressed in its attributes and modes, and that it is ontologically real in that expressed form, giving rise to a real world of objects and ideas. Hemmingsen's article compares the competing interpretations of Tripathi and Deleuze, focusing on three issues: (1) the ontological status of the attributes, (2) acosmism and the unity of all existence, and (3) the parallelism of the attributes. The result is a fascinating analysis of Spinoza's philosophy, although the reader wishes Hemmingsen had ventured more deeply into Spinoza's own statements, explaining where either Deleuze or Tripathi failed to come to grips with what Spinoza actually said.

Also in 2018, MD-Zizaur Rahaman and Ashaduzzaman Khan wrote an article comparing the philosophies of Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 C.E.), Spinoza, and Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240 C.E.). Their article makes the point that in all three systems, God is identified in some way with the physical world and with individual souls. Rāmānuja describes physical matter and individual souls as attributes or modes of a single divine substance, and — in contrast to Śāṅkara — Rāmānuja insists that the world is real, rejecting Śāṅkara's assertion

that God is devoid of qualities (*nirguṇa brahman*).⁶¹ In these ways, Rāmānuja's philosophy seems to be similar to that of Spinoza, but Rāmānuja uses the terms "attribute" (*viśeṣaṇa*), "mode" (*prakāra*), and "substance" (*dravya, viśeṣya, prakāri*) in very different ways than Spinoza uses them, making the two philosophies verbally similar but semantically distinct. Significantly, Rāmānuja does not describe an isomorphism of thought and matter, nor does he assert that all material objects have minds and that all consciousness is consciousness of self. In addition, Rāmānuja embraces (1) absolute free will, (2) the immortality of the individual soul, and (3) the existence of a personal God that intervenes in history. In short, Rāmānuja's philosophy — unlike Spinoza's — expresses the widely held intuitions of devotional religion. Nonetheless, it does relate all things, including both mind and matter, to God.⁶² Ibn 'Arabī, by contrast, describes the physical world and living beings as *reflections* of God.⁶³ Rahaman and Khan conclude their article by noting that despite the irreconcilable distinctions among religions, the concepts of God and world (and their relation to one another) are similar in each of these three philosophies.⁶⁴

61 Rahaman, MD-Zizaur, and Ashaduzzaman Khan, "The Concept of God: A Comparative Study of Ramanuja, Spinoza, and Ibn-Arabi," in *Research Guru*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Sept. 2018), pp. 91–94.

62 Rāmānuja also embraces the theory of divine incarnation (*avatāra*). For a general introduction to Rāmānuja's thought, see Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II (George Allen & Unwin LTD, 2nd edition, 1931), ch. IX; Ādidevānanda (transl.), *Yatīndramatadīpikā by Śrīnivāsadāsa: A Hand Book on the Philosophy of Rāmānuja* (Sri Ramakrishna Math 1949).

63 Rahaman and Khan, "The Concept of God," pp. 96–98.

64 Rahaman and Khan, "The Concept of God,"

As this brief survey of the relevant literature shows, many scholars have taken an interest in the obvious parallels between Hindu thought and Spinoza's more recent philosophical system. The most important distinction that several scholars have recognized relates to the ontological status of the objective world. According to Śāṅkara's Vedānta, the world is a false appearance superimposed on God. Some scholars have argued that Spinoza holds a similar view, and others have strongly disagreed. The remainder of this article will focus on this dispute, concluding that for Spinoza the objective world is real and that the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy is wrong.

2. The Attributes of Divine Substance

We have seen that for Spinoza, "substance" (*substantia*) is the ground of being; it is that in which other things inhere, but which itself inheres in no other thing. (*Ethics*, ID3.) And Spinoza further asserts that only one infinite, eternal, and self-sufficient substance exists and that it is God. (*Id.*, IP11 and IP14.) These descriptions make Spinoza's divine substance comparable to Vedānta's Brahman, as numerous scholars have noted.

But one issue in particular has troubled scholars who have compared Spinoza's philosophy to that of the Hindu sages, and that issue is the proper way to understand Spinoza's assertion that "substance" (i.e., God) has infinite "attributes" (i.e., ways of being comprehended), of which the "attribute of thought" and the "attribute of extension" are but two. As described above, some scholars have adopted a subjective interpretation of the attributes, asserting that the attributes are mere ascriptions of the philosopher's intellect with no real existence, and based on that conclusion, these

scholars assert that, for Spinoza, thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are just appearances. This interpretation, of course, closely aligns Spinoza's philosophy with Śāṅkara's doctrine of world-illusion (*māyāvāda*).⁶⁵ Other scholars have argued that the attributes of substance are ontologically real, and because they are infinite in number, they infinitely multiply God's being, making God infinitely greater than what human beings can know, and hence transcendent.⁶⁶ And a third view is that the attributes are distinct aspects of the divine substance, and they are therefore real, but as aspects of a single thing, they do not multiply God's being.⁶⁷ Which of these descriptions is most accurate?

According to Spinoza, the attributes are "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence." (*Ethics*, ID4.) The modes, by contrast, are "the affections of a substance" (*id.*, ID5), meaning the modifications that inhere in a substance. Therefore, if the intellect is ascribing the attribute of thought to a substance, and hence to the modifications of that sub-

65 On the subjective interpretation of the attributes, see, e.g., Wolfson, Harry Austryn, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Harvard Univ. Press 1934), vol. I, pp. 146–157. On the comparison to Vedānta, see, e.g., Buch, *The Philosophy of Śāṅkara*, pp. 201–203; Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. v–vi, 65–66, 68–73, 89, 92, 113, 121, 122–129, 134, 154–160, 184–188, 197–200, 203–208, 211–216, 314–322.

66 See, e.g., Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 93–117.

67 See, e.g., Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes and Modes," in Della Rocca, Michael (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza* (Oxford Univ. Press 2017), pp. 90–103; Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Spinoza's Deification of Existence," in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, vol. 6 (2013), pp. 98–102.

stance, then Finite Mode A seems to be an idea of the mind, but if the intellect is ascribing the attribute of extension to those same modifications, then Finite Mode A seems to be a particular configuration of a material brain.

In each case, however, the intellect is *ascribing* something to the substance, and it is perceiving the substance and its modifications relative to that ascription. Hence, the careful reader will be asking, What is Finite Mode A *as it is in itself*, without any ascription of the intellect? Put another way, if the intellect inevitably perceives the essence of substance under this or that attribute, is the perceivable world merely an appearance, analogous to the illusory world of Śāṅkara's Vedānta, and is the world *as it is in itself* unknowable?

As noted, some Vedānta scholars have made that argument, but Spinoza flatly rejects it. He asserts that “[t]he human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.” (*Ethics*, IIP47.) In Spinoza's usage “adequate knowledge” means knowledge that is true. Moreover, the intellect, according to Spinoza, is the rational subpart of the mind, and its ideas — being either axiomatic or derived by flawless reasoning — are never false. (See *id.*, IIP41.) Therefore, if the attributes are “what the *intellect* perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (*id.*, ID4, italics added), then they must be true perceptions, not mere perceptual overlays. Hence, the attributes must correspond to something that actually exists in the essence of the divine substance itself, which means that they are ontologically real, not mere illusions.⁶⁸

The widespread confusion, however, regarding the ontological status of the

attributes is due, in part, to Spinoza's seeming equivocation on the question. For example, Spinoza claims that “outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections” (*Ethics*, IP4, Dem.), thus implying that the attributes are mere ascriptions of the intellect and therefore unreal, and he likewise asserts that “the intellect . . . *attributes* such and such a definite nature to substance” (Letter 9 [IV/46/20–25], italics added). To better understand what Spinoza means by these statements, an analogy might help. A circle can be accurately conceived geometrically. It is then a two-dimensional figure representing the locus of points equidistant from a single point. But a circle can also be conceived algebraically. It is then the equation $x^2 + y^2 = k$, where x and y are variables and k is a constant. Underlying both these alternative conceptions of a circle is the same mathematical idea, and both conceptions are ways the intellect perceives that underlying mathematical idea. Both are equally true since both accurately express the underlying mathematical idea. Moreover, neither can be eliminated in favor of the other; neither is more valid than the other. One can think of them as mere ascriptions of the intellect, since they are the intellect's ways of perceiving the underlying mathematical idea, but because both are equally true and because neither can be eliminated in favor of the other, both are real. Thus, these alternative ways of conceiving of a circle can be understood as *aspects* of the underlying mathematical idea. In a similar way, the attributes of thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are, according to Spinoza, aspects of a single divine substance. One can think of them as mere ascriptions of the intellect since they are the intellect's ways of perceiving the divine substance, but they are real, not illusions.

68 See Melamed, “The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics,” pp. 90–103, esp. pp. 95 and 102; Melamed, “Spinoza's Deification of Existence,” pp. 98–102.

But our story doesn't end there, for everything we have said so far still seems to be erected upon an idealistic foundation. Notice that Spinoza uses the language of mentation whenever he discusses the attributes. In other words, thought does a double duty in Spinoza's system; it acts as one of the attributes that the intellect perceives (alongside an infinite number of non-mental attributes), but at a higher level, it also acts as the intellect's own act of perception. Spinoza says that everything can be "comprehended" as either thought or extension (i.e., mind or matter),⁶⁹ but since *thought* is the thing doing the comprehending, *thought* must be the ultimate ground of being, and the non-mental attributes must be unreal.

But that seems to be true only because by trying to solve the philosophical riddle, we are *thinking* about it. According to thought-matter equivalence, the intellect that perceives the attributes — and, ultimately, we are referring to the infinite intellect⁷⁰ — is just as much an extended thing as it is a thinking thing. (See *Ethics*, IIP13; Letter 32 [IV/173a/15–174a/10]; see also *Ethics*, VP29.) In other words, for Spinoza, our perception of the attributes derives from their actual existence, not the other way around. Therefore, no attribute is eliminable, and none can be reduced to another.

As noted, some Vedānta scholars, accepting that the attributes are ontologically real, have argued that because Spinoza defines God as a being that is

69 "[T]he thinking substance [(i.e., thought)] and the extended substance [(i.e., matter)] are one and the same substance, which is now *comprehended* under this attribute, now under that." *Ethics*, IIP7, Schol., italics added.

70 Spinoza also defines the attributes as "whatever can be perceived by an *infinite intellect* as constituting an essence of substance." *Ethics*, IIP7, Schol., italics added.

"absolutely infinite," "consisting of an infinity of attributes" (*Ethics*, ID6), and because human beings can conceive of only two such attributes (see Letter 64 [IV/277/10–278/5]), God's being — like that of Śaṅkara's Brahman — is infinitely greater than what is humanly knowable. There are two problems with this reasoning. First, it fails to recognize that the attributes constitute aspects of the same substance, not different substances. Therefore, although they are ontologically real, they do not multiply God's being. The fact that there are different, equally valid ways to conceive of a thing does not imply that there are different things being conceived. Second, Spinoza does not commit himself to the actual existence of any attributes other than thought and extension; rather, he commits himself to the assertion that God is unconstrained, free, and independent, which is what Spinoza means when he uses the term "infinite." God must have "infinite" attributes because any limitation on the number of God's attributes would imply the existence of something outside God that imposed that limitation, and no such thing exists. As Spinoza explains,

[w]e form the axiom [that God has infinite attributes (*Ethics*, IP10, Schol.)] from the idea we have of an absolutely infinite Being . . . , and not from the fact that there are, *or could be*, beings which have three, four, etc., attributes. (Letter 64 [IV/278/20–25], italics added.)

In summary, in Spinoza's philosophy, the attributes of divine substance are ontologically real, which means that the world is real. Moreover, the attributes of divine substance are infinite in number, but such infinitude does not place God's essence beyond the reach of the human mind. And it is precisely these points — the reality of the world and the knowability of God —

that most sharply distinguish Spinoza's philosophy from Śaṅkara's Vedānta, but importantly, it is these same points that also distinguish *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy from Śaṅkara's Vedānta, making *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy the closer analog to Spinozism. Nor is this distinction from Śaṅkara's Vedānta without important consequences. The world can be a difficult place. Countless people lack adequate nutrition and shelter. Epidemic diseases sweep across the planet. Wars ravage entire nations. If these calamities are unreal, why apply oneself to discovery, invention, and industry? Why eke out some small benefit through ingenuity and toil? Quietism and renunciation seem like the better response. But has any society overcome hunger, cold, disease, and war by the methods of quietism and renunciation? *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy and Spinoza teach us that the world is real and that it operates according to immutable physical laws, laws that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real answers to real problems. This teaching is nothing less than a call to action.

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