

Modes, Predication, and Charity: A Reply to Melamed¹

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In *Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics* (2019), I defended a realist interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics. In so doing I developed a new interpretation of Spinoza's ontological categories, especially those of attribute and mode, and the role of the Principle of Sufficient Reason in his system. Yitzhak Melamed has recently published a review of my book in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2021) that raises interesting interpretative, philosophical, and methodological questions. Despite some kind words about my efforts, his review—as reviews generally do—focuses on issues where he thinks I've gone wrong. And, apparently, I've gone very wrong indeed. I don't “provide textual support” for key claims. I “completely ignore a significant body of key texts” which run contrary to my interpretations. And, perhaps worst of all, I don't “even ask what Spinoza's own understanding” of crucial doctrines might be. All in all, my book “suffers from under-engagement with Spinoza's text.” These are serious criticisms. In what follows, I would like to respond to them.

Modes

The bulk of Melamed's review focuses on chapter five, which is about the category of mode in Spinoza's metaphysics. Melamed does not discuss, even in passing, my own positive interpretive proposal. Instead, he focuses almost exclusively on defending his own view against what he takes my criticisms of it to be. Nevertheless, I think it would be worthwhile to start by giving a bare outline of my own positive interpretation of the modes.

According to Spinoza, there is only one substance: God or nature. All else—including human bodies and minds—are *modes* of this one substance. In the seventeenth century, the term *mode* is often taken to mean an accidental or inessential property of a thing. But what could it mean to say that, for example, human bodies and minds are properties of a single substance? Many philosophers have found this doctrine to be outrageous if not downright incoherent. Consider the property of having a shape on the one hand and the body or physical object that has that shape on the other. They seem so fundamentally different as to belong to different ontological categories. Moreover, the idea that a

¹ I would like to thank Don Garrett and Ian Proops for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

shape can be predicated of a body is familiar enough, but what could it mean to predicate a body of something else? What is more, bodies and minds themselves have properties that don't look to be second-order properties, i.e., properties of properties. For example, some bodies push, and others pull. But if bodies were properties, then properties would have to push and pull. If minds were properties, then properties would have to have convictions and wants. But can properties push, pull, believe, and desire? Assuming that they cannot, then to what are such first-order properties attributed? If everything other than God is property, the only eligible candidate for being the subject of predication for first-order properties is God himself. This, however, would result in contradiction since different bodies and minds can be subject to contradictory first-order properties. Obviously, an interpretation of modes according to which they inhere in but are not properties of the one substance would be attractive.

In my book, I offer just such an interpretation. On my reading, modes are accidental beings belonging to the same ontological category as waves and fists. Waves and fists are objects, but they do not exist *per se* or in their own right. A wave exists in virtue of the fact that the water oscillates. A fist exists in virtue of the fact that a hand is clenched. Thus, they are accidental objects that depend on other beings for their existence. For Spinoza, bodies are like waves on the oceans of extension and minds are like waves on the oceans of thought.

Spinoza defines modes as that which are in and conceived through another (1d5). My interpretation makes sense of both conditions. With respect to the first condition—modes are in another—I take this relation to correspond to the traditional notion of inherence. Inherence is typically taken to entail asymmetrical ontological dependence. If *x* inheres in *y*, then *x* depends on *y* for its existence but *y* doesn't depend on *x* for its existence. If bodies, for example, are like waves on the oceans of extension, then this asymmetrical ontological dependence is both secured and explained. Waves depend on oceans for their existence but oceans do not depend on waves for theirs. This is because the very being of a wave is constituted by the being of the ocean. Similarly, the very being of a body is constituted by the being of the extended substance. With respect to the second condition—modes are conceived through the thing in which they are—my interpretation performs similarly well. To see this, we must distinguish a logical from a psychological sense of conception. The psychological sense concerns how we think about things. The logical sense concerns how we (correctly or adequately) define things. Just as it would be impossible to define a wave without reference to the

medium which oscillates, it would be impossible to define a body without reference to the extended substance in which it inheres. In this sense, modes are conceived through the substance in which they inhere.

I claim that my interpretation of the modes coheres with and makes sense of nearly everything Spinoza says about the modes. And once we adopt it, all the apparent problems with Spinoza's monism dissolve. Consequently, I think there are powerful reasons to accept my interpretation. Melamed disagrees. First, he doesn't think that it coheres with everything Spinoza says about the modes. Second, according to him, we shouldn't concern ourselves with making sense of and dissolving problems for figures in the history of philosophy because our sense and our problems may not, after all, be theirs.

Let us consider these objections in turn. According to Melamed, I ignore a "significant body of key texts in which Spinoza treats modes as properties." One such alleged text is 1p16 and its demonstration. Melamed characterizes this text as one in which Spinoza treats modes as properties. But does he? Not so far as I can tell. Here is the text:

1P16: From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes,⁴³ (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect.)

Dem.: This Proposition must be plain to anyone, provided he attends to the fact that the intellect infers from the given definition of any thing a number of properties that really do follow necessarily from it (i.e., from the very essence of the thing); and that it infers more properties the more the definition of the thing expresses reality, i.e., the more reality the essence of the defined thing involves. But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes (by 1D6), each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect), q.e.d.

Exactly how the demonstration is supposed to work is widely acknowledged to be obscure, but it certainly does not contain any explicit treatment of modes as properties. What Spinoza *does* explicitly claim here is that a proportionality obtains between the properties that follow from a thing's

definition and the things that follow from its nature. Why does this proportionality obtain? Melamed assumes that this is because things are properties. But this interpretative leap is not demanded by the text. My own interpretation is that the properties that follow from the definition of God are what is necessarily true of him. Modes are things that exist in virtue of subjects satisfying certain conditions, that is to say, what is true of them. Thus, because infinitely many properties follow from the definition of God, infinitely many modes result. In short, 1p16, on my reading of it, does not treat modes as properties.

Melamed also refers us to several other texts. But none of them, despite his confident assurances, identify modes and properties. The first text is 1d5, where Spinoza defines modes as *affectiones* of a substance. Melamed correctly points out that the Latin *affectio* is normally translated into English as ‘state’, which could be viewed as a synonym for ‘property’. But my interpretation requires us to read Spinoza as subtly shifting the standard meaning of *mode* from accidental property to accidental object. Such a shift would hardly be surprising for a philosopher who doesn’t shy away from repurposing existing philosophical vocabulary when needed. If Spinoza shifts the meaning of *mode*, one would expect corresponding shifts in synonymous terms such as *affectio*. Thus, although 1d5 says that modes are *affectiones*, the assumption that *affectiones* are properties simply begs the question.

The second text is 3d3 where Spinoza speaks of affects as *affectiones* of the body. Melamed comments: “I doubt anyone would deny that affects such as joy, lust, and anger are states that inhere in the body (or in the mind).”² I think *Spinoza* would deny it. Joy, lust, and anger are, for Spinoza, emotions that inhere in the mind, but are they properties? I would say that, for Spinoza, emotions are mental events that occur insofar as a subject is a certain way. Events—birthday parties, wars, kisses—are not properties. Thus, on this reading, 3d3 is not a text where Spinoza treats modes as properties.

Another text comes from Leibniz who reports a conversation he had with Spinoza to a correspondent. In that conversation, Spinoza allegedly says that “creatures are only modes or accidents.” But note that he does not say that modes are properties. What he says is that they are

² Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27.

accidents, or beings in the category of accident. That they are beings in the category of accident does not rule out the possibility that they are accidental objects, as they are in my interpretation.

The same point could be made about another text cited by Melamed, Letter 4 to Henry Oldenburg, in which Spinoza writes: “but by modification or Accident, [I understand] what is in another and is conceived through what it is in.” Just as before, I do not dispute that modes are accidental beings. I only deny that they are accidental properties rather than accidental objects.

All the texts that Melamed points to are neutral with respect to the question as to whether modes are accidental properties or accidental objects. Consequently, pointing to them cannot help him prevail in our disagreement.

Melamed also accuses me of ignoring the textual evidence concerning predication. Apparently, I “claim that (for Spinoza) predicates must be universal terms,” and what is more, I do not “even ask what Spinoza's understanding of predication is.” This is most unfortunate because “Spinoza has quite a few interesting things to say about predication.”

Let’s look at the “quite a few interesting things [that Spinoza] says about predication.” Melamed cites two texts. Concerning the first, he writes:

In TIE §62 [Spinoza] claims that to have an idea is to have a "connection of subject and predicate." Presumably, we can have an idea of the inherence of a specific mode in God. What would then be the subject and predicate connected in this idea?

Melamed apparently thinks that his rhetorical question is embarrassing for my denial that particulars can be predicated of a subject. I’m not sure why he thinks this as nothing in my view would prevent *inheres in God* from being predicated of any specific mode. I need only deny that the predicate *inheres in God* refers to a particular, which it doesn’t.

Even more seriously, the greater context of TIE §62 reveals that, contrary to Melamed’s insinuation, the quoted text has no bearing at all on the issue of predication and particularity. Rather, Spinoza’s topic is fiction and how fictions can be distinguished from true ideas. Specifically, TIE §62 says that

the clearer and more distinct our ideas, the less likely we are to engage in fiction-making. Spinoza writes:

For if by chance we should say that men are changed in a moment into beasts, that is said very generally, so that there is in the mind no concept, i.e., idea, or connection of subject and predicate. For if there were any concept, the mind would see together the means and causes, how and why such a thing was done. And one does not attend to the nature of the subject and of the predicate.

Spinoza is claiming that when we utter a sentence like *men are changed into beasts*, our utterance is not accompanied by any concept or idea which connects the subject (*men*), to the predicate (*are changed into beasts*). This is because if we had a clear and distinct idea of men changing into beasts, Spinoza asserts, we would also have to have some idea of how this could come about. Of course, such a thing cannot come about and so we have no clear and distinct idea of it. Obviously, none of this has bearing on the issue of whether particular modes can be predicated of a subject.

Another text that I supposedly ignore is the *Short Treatise* in which “Spinoza repeatedly asserts that ‘all in all must be predicated of Nature’ or God (I/22/10 and I/23/20).” But when these passages are read in context, they are clearly irrelevant to the issue of whether particular modes can be predicated. The texts occur in the chapter of the *Short Treatise* called “What God Is.” Spinoza introduces his theme as follows:

Now that we have demonstrated that God is, it is time to show what he is. He is, we say, a being of which all, or infinite, attributes are predicated, each of which is infinitely perfect in its own kind.

Spinoza’s topic here is clearly not the predication of modes of substance but rather the ascription of attributes to substance. Over the course of the chapter, does Spinoza’s topic shift or expand? Here is the passage from which Melamed’s first citation comes:

From all of these it follows that of Nature all in all is predicated, and that thus Nature consists of infinite attributes, of which each is perfect in its kind. This agrees perfectly with the definition one gives of God. [I.22]

Here is the second:

The reasons why we have said that all these attributes which are in Nature are only one, single being, and by no means different ones (though we can clearly and distinctly understand the one without the other), are as follows: Because we have already found previously that there must be an infinite and perfect being, by which nothing else can be understood but a being of which all in all must be predicated.

[1.23]

Spinoza's topic is clearly the predication of infinite attributes of God or Nature. It is decidedly not the predication of modes of God. Thus they have no relevance to the topic under discussion.

I cannot find a single instance in Spinoza's oeuvre where he speaks of predicating a mode of a substance. On my interpretation, that is because he doesn't think that they are. Other interpreters, including Melamed, develop an understanding of modes according to which they are predicated of a substance. Beyond Spinoza's silence on the issue, the problem is that, as noted earlier, the human mind and body are modes. Thus, on interpretations such as Melamed's, human minds and bodies are predicated of a substance. It's very difficult to understand what that could possibly mean. On my interpretation, the problem doesn't arise. So much the better.

Melamed disagrees. According to him, I've gone wrong because we shouldn't be trying to make the views of figures in the history of philosophy plausible or reasonable. After all, he appears to reason, our problems may not be theirs and trying to make plausible or reasonable the views of a historical figure like Spinoza tempts us toward "a hermeneutics of domestication that tries to save Spinoza from himself by forcing on him views he never held." This is not to say that Melamed totally rejects anything like a principle of charity, but he offers it only an extremely limited scope. He writes:

Interpretive charity is justified when we are dealing with obvious typos. Personally, I would even consider employing a non-literal "charitable" reading of the text were I to find in Spinoza's work a claim such as: "2 is an odd number." In such a case, I would consider the possibility that Spinoza was using either '2' or 'odd number' in an idiosyncratic sense. Were I to do so, my first obligation would be to check

systematically how Spinoza is using these two terms (and closely related terms such as 'even number', '4', etc.).

Let's leave aside Melamed's misleading suggestion that his interpretation is more sensitive to the text than mine. We've already seen that this is far from the case. Let us focus instead on the question of what role, if any, something like a principle of charity should play in the interpretative enterprise of an historian of philosophy. Could we dispense with it for anything other than cases like obvious typos or statements the negation of which are theorems of arithmetic? In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to stipulate what we mean by 'the principle of charity.' Here's my version: I assume that Spinoza is trying to say something true, coherent, intelligible, justified, reasonable, and plausible. (Perhaps other things belong on the list as well but it won't matter for present purposes.) These are goals that any philosopher would have.

These assumptions about a philosopher's goals can aid interpretation when texts are unclear. When texts are unclear, the interpreter must provide elucidations. Sometimes elucidation is easy and systematically checking how Spinoza, for example, uses certain words will clarify a text's meaning. Often, it is not so easy, and several candidate elucidations remain possible. Suppose that one candidate elucidation has Spinoza saying something that we have reason to believe that he would regard as less true, coherent, intelligible, justified, reasonable, and plausible than a rival. Which should we prefer? I believe that we could hardly do better than to prefer the interpretation that reflects Spinoza's own aims (truth, coherence, etc.) as he conceives them.

Of course, it might be the case that Spinoza's own understanding of truth, coherence, etc. might differ from my own. Does that mean that applying the principle of charity is a hopeless procedure, destined to anachronism or domestication? I don't think so. Instead, I believe that, when applying the principle, you must do so in stages, patiently working back and forth between your own understanding of the aims of philosophy and what one discovers about the target of interpretation's understanding through the process of interpretation. Start by assuming that Spinoza, for example, means what you do by truth, coherence, etc. The evidence (textual, historical, etc.) might lead you to a revised understanding of Spinoza's own conception of his aims. Then apply that revised understanding to the interpretation of the text and the process starts all over again. The process is complete when the understanding of the aims and evidence no longer clash. This can be a one step

process when the evidence gives you no reason to suppose that Spinoza's understanding is different than your own. It can also be a long back and forth process. There is, of course, no guarantee of success, but it is the best procedure I know. It was what I attempted to do in *Being and Reason*.

Was I successful? Perhaps not. Nevertheless, I don't believe that, if I failed, I did so in the egregious manner that Melamed alleges. For example, he thinks that I insist without argument that the idea of predicating one particular of another is nonsensical and immediately infer via charity that modes cannot be properties. Here is a reconstruction of what he takes my argument to be:

1. It is senseless for a particular to be predicated of another particular.
2. Therefore, by the Principle of Charity, if modes are metaphysical predicates, then they must be universals. (from 1)
3. Modes are particulars.
4. Therefore, modes are not the metaphysical correlates of predicates. (from 2 and 3)

Unfortunately for Melamed, I make no such argument in my book. In particular, I never assert (2). Personally, I don't believe that predication involves attributing universals to subjects. In fact, I don't think predication involves relating two entities to one another. In my view, there is more to reality than ontology. Consequently, no Principle of Charity would put pressure on me to believe (2). Why then does Melamed saddle me with it? He cites p.103 of my book to back up his ascription of (2), but the passage he points to is a summary of the views of the Victorian scholar Harold Joachim.³ It's Joachim's view that I am stating there, not mine.

Premise (1) is also presented in Melamed's review in a misleading way. It's true that I can't make much sense of predicating a particular like a body, for example, of a substance. Spinoza never says that we predicate things like bodies of a substance. So, naturally enough, I prefer *ceteris paribus* an interpretation on which bodies aren't predicated of a substance. But, as I said earlier, this doesn't mean that I think that my understanding is definitive. It's just a starting place from which to begin an interpretation. Fortunately, in developing my interpretation of modes, I was never forced by the text or by other considerations to impute to Spinoza anything different. Despite this, in his review,

³ Martin Lin, *Being and Reason: an interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 103.

Melamed finds occasion to wonder why I am so obtuse as to not be able to understand predicating particulars. *He* can perfectly well understand predicating a body of a substance. Or so he assures us. However, Melamed's assertion that *he* can understand predicating particulars of a subject is irrelevant. I'm not offering an interpretation of *him* but rather of Spinoza. And nothing Spinoza says leads me to believe that he thinks particulars are predicated. Ultimately, I think it reasonable to say that Melamed's reconstruction of my argument is unfair, not to say uncharitable.

Lin, Martin. *Being and Reason: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Melamed, Yitzhak. *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.