

What can we do with Spinoza?

Dimitris Vardoulakis, ed. *Spinoza Now*.  
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*Spinoza Now* is an important addition to a new strand of literature on philosopher Baruch Spinoza: one that seeks to examine the significance of his thought beyond the philosophy classroom. It is a strong collection of essays that are individually thought-provoking and collectively coherent, giving the widest possible overview of the interesting work being done on Spinoza today. Though dealing with different subjects, and written from different disciplines, thematic similarities emerge that encourage us to see Spinoza in a different light: as a philosopher with whom new and exciting things can be done. Indeed, the guiding question of the book might be ‘what can we do with Spinoza?’

*Spinoza Now* is therefore a very different anthology from, say, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*. There is no editorial obligation to cover Spinoza’s various works or the key concepts studied on undergraduate courses. Little context or explanation of Spinoza’s terms or arguments is provided. It is, instead, a book of experiments: its fourteen authors have been given the freedom to use the same core material – Spinoza’s metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and political writings – to try new combinations of thought. Inevitably the results are somewhat mixed. Some chapters are fully worked-out arguments whereas others appear more speculative; some leave us with new ways of thinking, whereas others fail to achieve the hypothesized results. I do not think this unevenness is necessarily a weakness, for it reflects the spirit and method of the book. The papers have been well chosen by Vardoulakis, avoiding repetition and over-representation by political themes (always a danger in Spinoza collections). The book includes new essays by some major figures (Alain Badiou, Warren Montag, and Antonio Negri) alongside those by established and less-established scholars, organized into four parts: ‘Strategies for Reading Spinoza’; ‘Politics, Theology, and Interpretation’; ‘Spinoza and the Arts’; and ‘Encounters about Life and Death’.

In Part I, the opening chapter by Christopher Norris is an excellent paper on the history of conflicting interpretations of Spinoza. It nicely sets the tone for the volume by asking whether there is something about Spinoza’s philosophy that lends itself to multiple, often competing, interpretations. Badiou’s chapter, ‘What is a Proof in Spinoza’s *Ethics*?’, immerses us in the geometry of Spinoza’s demonstrations. Providing a ‘skeleton’ diagram of *Ethics* I P28, he reveals the network of earlier proofs ‘immanent’ to it. Badiou (who has apparently constructed many such diagrams for the proofs of the *Ethics*) claims that the extent of a proof’s skeleton is a measure of its complexity, but this is not so; some of Spinoza’s most complex ideas are proved most simply (*Ethics* II P7, the thesis of parallelism, for instance, which refers back only to one axiom). The notion that the geometrical complexity of a proof relates to its power is intriguing, but Badiou does not do enough to elaborate it here.

A highlight of the collection is Justin Clemens’ brilliant piece on ‘Spinoza’s Ass’. Clemens looks at the paradox of Buridan’s ass – an animal that cannot choose between alternatives of food and water placed at equal distances – and Spinoza’s dismissal of the ‘problems of decision’ usually associated with it. With impressive

research, Clemens traces the paradox through its philosophical and economic uses, and finds in Spinoza's discussion of it a new dimension: Buridan's ass is brought out at *Ethics* II P49S to criticize not only Descartes' theory of the will, but also Hobbes' position on sovereignty. While I was unconvinced by Clemens' insistence on the political significance of the paradox, I hugely admired his attempt to persuade me of it. This is Spinoza scholarship of the most creative kind.

Part II opens with Michael Mack defending the thesis that Spinoza provides the basis for a 'non-hierarchical and non-exclusive understanding of human sociability' (p.100). Laudable though this sentiment is, it seems to me to ignore the Nietzschean side of Spinoza's thought: the side that promotes power and its increase. Mack's argument depends on his claim that any position that is pro-hierarchical is necessarily pro-teleological as well, and while I do not dispute that historically philosophers adhering to the first position have tended also to hold to the second, there is no necessary connection between them. Nor do I understand why Mack believes teleology leads necessarily to discrimination, exploitation and violence. Spinoza may be pro-hierarchical and anti-teleological (though plenty of critics have found a teleological thread in his work); none of it means he must be in favour of exploitation. These are interesting and complicated questions for Spinoza which needed to be thought through a little further.

The centrepiece of the book, whether intentionally or not, is Cesare Casarino's 'Marx Before Spinoza: Notes toward an Investigation'. The editor has been far too generous with the word limit here: the essay (38 pages long, followed by a staggering 17 pages of endnotes) is twice as long as any other in the book, and is badly unfocused. Complex discussion of Deleuze's notion of sense struggles for prominence against the paper's central argument that 'it is impossible to make sense of Spinoza without making sense first of Marx' (p.179). The latter claim would have been interesting had it been properly considered. What it amounts to here is a messy argument that the 'connectedness of all things', which for Marx characterizes capitalism, is the precondition for Spinoza's 'concatenation of all being' in substance – suggesting that Spinoza's *Ethics* could have been written only in a capitalist society. Well, maybe. But what is to be gained from this reduction of a philosophical system to the economic circumstances of its genesis? For Casarino, it seems to be the conclusion that Spinoza is an 'anti-capitalist thinker'. This is evidenced, he claims, by Spinoza's remarks that accumulating wealth for its own sake is ethically bad. But this view does not entail a critique of capitalism. Spinoza's belief that wealth is not an end in itself was shared not only by Aristotle and the Stoics, but also by his capitalist neighbours, who would have wholeheartedly affirmed the Christian doctrine that the love of money is the root of all evil. Castigating the love of money turns out not to contradict the drive to profit: the lack of a contradiction here is just what makes capitalism so interesting, and its lifelong partnership with Protestantism so plausible. If Spinoza is an anti-capitalist thinker (and again, I do not think it is obvious that he is), we should find evidence for that in his critique of the ways theology, politics, and economics are themselves 'concatenated'. Casarino misses this, and thus misses both what is so interesting about capitalism and what is so interesting about making it the context for Spinoza's thought.

Part III is an especially welcome inclusion since, following the dominant view that Spinoza has nothing to say about art and aesthetics, very little has been written about

it. That there are things to say about Spinoza and art emerges from these three chapters. The first, by Sebastian Egenhofer, is on Thomas Hirschhorn's 1999 *Spinoza Monument*. I did not get along with the style of this essay, but I am glad to see an art theorist writing about this piece. I would gladly have read a longer paper by Anthony Uhlmann, whose ten-page essay 'Spinoza, Ratiocination, and Art', while somewhat impressionistic, reveals great depth of thought about its subject. Taking relation to be the point of contact between Spinoza and the arts, he makes an intriguing case for relation, ratio and proportion as inhabiting thought itself.

An essay about Rembrandt and Spinoza, by Mieke Bal and Dimitris Vardoulakis, had great potential but was marred by the imprecise and obfuscating language of cultural studies. Take, for instance, the sentences that state the paper's argument:

Interruption, as a concept and as a praxis, could be used to broach the relation between Rembrandt and Spinoza. In that case, the impossibility of their relation would be nothing more – and nothing less – than the impossible unity between philosophical contemplation and artistic endeavour, the discontinuous relation between the realm of essences and the plane of existence. But then, their relation will not be impossible in any simple sense any longer; rather it will be (im)possible, a possibility that cannot be simply stated (p.279).

Now, I am used to reading the difficult specialist language and grammatical constructions of continental philosophy. I happily read Derrida and Deleuze, and would defend their style against the complaints of those who demand that philosophers speak plainly. But the quoted passage is just incoherent, and it is impossible to make any sense of that or the remainder of the essay. Vardoulakis (I presume) makes a good effort to argue that art, for Spinoza, distinguishes existence from essence, but this is conjoined to an unbelievable interpretive reverie on three works by Rembrandt (presumably by Bal). How these two halves are supposed to relate is not at all clear, and not in the positive sense of 'discontinuous relation' that perhaps the authors intended. This was disappointing.

By contrast, in Part IV, A. Kiarina Kordela's chapter 'A Thought beyond Dualisms, Creationist and Evolutionist alike', is a joy to read. It is a strong, well-argued, and admirably clear essay that goes against the grain of the recent Spinoza scholarship that takes his thought to be purely life-affirming. Kordela argues instead that Spinoza's thought involves an intertwining of life and death, and uses the tools of psychoanalytical philosophy to show how. I enjoyed her criticism of Damasio's claim that Spinoza inverts Cartesian dualism and his argument for a Spinozistic evolutionism. I admired her sophisticated and provocative argument for the co-necessity of the death drive and the pleasure principle in Spinoza's thought. Kordela's chapter was completely refreshing, and actually made me think differently about Spinoza. She also provides one of the most compelling interpretations of Spinoza's concept of eternity that I have ever come across. I look forward to reading her much-acclaimed book *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan*.

It is not possible for me to discuss all fourteen chapters here. I have not mentioned Simon Duffy on the joyful passions, Arthur Jacobson on Prophecy in Spinoza and Maimonides, or Alexander García Düttmann on Spinoza and Derrida. Nor have I

discussed Montag's or Negri's contributions, new essays which will be eagerly read by their fans. I must note that out of fourteen essays, only one and a half are by women. Given all the good Spinoza scholars out there who happen to be female, this is a great shame.

Despite the low points that I have noted, I found this book to be a very exciting addition to the literature on Spinoza. Readers of Spinoza in any discipline will find something of interest here, and I would not hesitate to recommend some of these essays to students, who are often especially curious about Spinoza's outward and interdisciplinary connections. The chapters vary in their accessibility, and few are suited to readers coming to Spinoza (or to philosophy) for the first time. Most are rooted in the traditions of continental philosophy and its adjunct disciplines: continental philosophy of literature, law, politics, and so on. But for readers in those disciplines, and those who know and like Spinoza and want to see what can be done with his thought, this book is a great starting point. Order this for your library, and browse with joy.

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