

Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics, by Martin Lin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. x + 200.

1.

Just how far does Spinoza's rationalism go? Many have said: all the way. For example, in a recent handbook entry on the topic, Martin Lin takes the strong line that

Spinoza...believes that everything has an explanation. No aspect of the world is fundamentally unintelligible or incomprehensible. There is nothing brute. These claims each express what is often called the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR hereafter). (Lin 2017, 133)

Not everyone agrees, though—including, as it turns out, Martin Lin himself. In his new book, he argues that

many truths, that is, nonexistential truths, fall outside of the scope of Spinoza's PSR and thus not all truths require an explanation, let alone an explanation that ultimately grounds out in self-explanatory conceptual truths. (185)

That is, on Lin's new interpretation, the demand for intelligibility extends only to truths about what exists and what does not exist. Since there are very many truths that are not existential truths, Spinoza's rationalism is very much less demanding than has been thought. It's true that there must be some explanation for, say, the existence of some particular thought or some particular body. However, there may simply be no explanation of why squares are equilateral rectangles, nor of why oxygen atoms have eight protons—nor, for that matter, any explanation of why the Principle of Sufficient Reason itself is true.

So Lin's new book reflects a significant change of mind. But what exactly is at stake in this debate? As it turns out, this subtle interpretive dispute is no less than a battle for the soul of

Spinoza. When Michael Della Rocca's *Spinoza* was published just over a decade ago, it revived an old but heated disagreement about whether Spinoza's metaphysical commitments lead (or force) him into some form of idealism. In Lin's book, this debate has boiled over into a deeper debate about the nature of metaphysical rationalism.

Along the way, Lin argues lucidly for insightful interpretations of the central tenets of Spinoza's metaphysics, including the doctrine of mind-body parallelism, the doctrine that all particular things are modes of one infinite substance, and the doctrine that all things strive to persevere in their being. In each case, Lin is keen to show that Spinoza's commitment to metaphysical rationalism gives him no reason to embrace the forms of idealism or antirealism that various commentators have attributed to him. Here I'll describe just a few of the debates that *Being and Reason* enters into, highlighting the merits of Lin's interpretive proposals as well as their limitations.

2.

In developing a realist interpretation of Spinoza, Lin has his work cut out for him. Scholars have identified a number of different forms of idealism and antirealism in Spinoza's philosophy (as in, e.g., Newlands 2011). However, there are three in particular that have attracted the most attention from recent scholars, involving the rejection of the following three claims:

<i>Realism about the attributes:</i>	Each attribute (Thought, Extension, and whatever else there is) independently and truly constitutes an essence of God.
<i>Realism about the finite:</i>	Finite, concrete particulars have a (formally) real existence.
<i>Realism about dependence:</i>	There are multiple distinct metaphysical dependence relations, which are not reducible to conceptual dependence.

At various times, proponents of idealist or antirealist readings of Spinoza have denied each of these claims. In *Being and Reason*, Lin defends all of them. Speaking generally, his arguments in support of a realist interpretation of Spinoza are extremely persuasive. However, in each case, Lin's interpretation leaves open further idealist maneuvers.

Consider first the challenge facing realism about the attributes. The problem arises because Spinoza makes two claims that are difficult to reconcile: the one substance has infinitely many distinct, conceptually independent attributes, and yet attributes are 'what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence' (EId4). So the intellect perceives one substance to have infinitely many distinct essences, none of which reduce to any of the others. How can this be? *Subjectivists* argue that, if the intellect perceived correctly, it would follow that each attribute must correspond to a distinct substance, which is false. They conclude that the infinitely many attributes are merely subjective, and that Spinoza is ultimately committed to a form of idealism about the attributes. Traditionally, this view has been opposed by *objectivists*, who argue that the perception of the intellect is not (for Spinoza) open to error. Objectivists take this to imply that the distinct attributes must correspond to infinitely many distinct substances somehow bound together in union. The resulting interpretation is an unhappy one, for it requires giving up on substance monism. If realism about the attributes requires giving up Spinoza's central metaphysical doctrine, that is a significant mark against realism.

Lin's alternative treatment of the attributes embraces realism but also retains substance monism. Drawing inspiration from contemporary philosophy of language, Lin suggests that each attribute is the essence of substance conceived under a certain 'nondescriptive guise' (78). Thus the attribute of Extension is the essence of substance conceived under the guise of the concept *extension*, while the attribute of Thought is that very same essence conceived under the guise of the concept *thought*. This preserves substance monism, since the attributes all correspond to a single substantial

essence. But it also preserves the view that each attribute really does constitute the essence of substance. There is only one substance, and it really is both thinking and extended. However, ‘the mental and the physical differ only in how they are conceived’ (100), or as Lin elsewhere puts it, we use different ‘mental languages’ (79) when we understand substance now as thinking, now as extended.

This is extremely plausible as a reading of Spinoza. Indeed, recent scholarship seems to be converging on this reading: Tad Schmaltz (2020, 194-199) presents a different argument, using slightly different terminology, for what I take to be a functionally equivalent account of the attributes. But it is not entirely satisfactory as a way of defending realism about the attributes. Since each attribute expresses one and the same essence, the diversity of attributes is due to differences among the concepts involved in each attribute. Now, as Lin points out elsewhere, ‘Concepts are ways of grasping something in thought’ (63). But if this is right, then the attribute of Thought takes on special significance in Spinoza’s system. It appears to be preeminent over all the other attributes: they depend on Thought in a way that Thought does not depend on them. And so Lin’s account of the attributes leaves open (and indeed encourages) seeing Spinoza as an idealist after all. In the final analysis, Lin concedes that this is an ‘aspect of Spinoza’s philosophy...that might fairly be called anti-realist’ (185). In order for the plurality of attributes not to entail a plurality of substances, ‘it must be the case that our concepts of the attributes are individuated in such a way that they imply no metaphysical difference in the world’ (101).

It is also worth noting in passing that this account of the attributes is not entirely consistent with Lin’s own picture of Spinozistic conceptual connections. He rightly notes that conceptual connections need not be analytic. Frequently they are synthetic, albeit still independent of experience. In general, ‘Two things are conceptually connected just in case thoughts about one puts a subject in a position to know a priori something about the other’ (63). This is on the right track,

but it cannot be the whole story. After all, modes of different attributes are not supposed to be conceptually connected, but Spinoza holds that our knowledge of the composition of the body puts us in a position to know a priori that the human mind is also a composite entity. Some further constraint must be at work, then, about which kinds of a priori knowledge make for conceptual connectedness. However, it is not clear what that constraint is.

Serious difficulties also beset realism about the finite. On Spinoza's view, finite beings are defined partly in terms of negation: they are finite in the sense that they 'can be limited by another of the same nature' (EId2), and thus 'being finite is really, in part, a negation' (EIp8s1). At the same time, there can be no limitation or negation in the one infinite substance, such that (as Lin puts it), 'there are no metaphysical truths about negation' (129-30). Yet, as Spinoza's opponents have fondly pointed out, these two claims lead to the conclusion that finite things do not exist, a conclusion typically labeled acosmism. From a God's-eye view, all negation, and thus the entire cosmos of finite beings, simply disappears.

Since Spinoza did not accept the acosmist conclusion, the main problem here is to decide how he could get out of the argument. Lin observes that 'There is no question but that Spinoza believes that finitude is a negation' (130). He also holds that negation cannot be used to understand the essence or existence of anything. However, Lin argues, this does not entail acosmism—it only entails that negation doesn't pertain to the essence or existence of finite modes. How does this work? First, the finitude of a particular finite mode is not essential to it: 'External causes must always play a role in setting the limits of any finite mode' (131). And, since 'existence is realized essence' (131), the fact that essences are not characterized in terms of negation implies that existential truths also need not be characterized in terms of negation. There must be some negation-free way of conceiving the essence of any finite thing. Thus there is no reason to hold that finite things drop out of the picture when we ascend to the God's-eye view—they just won't show up as finite.

Lin's solution here bears affinities to those recently put forward by Kristin Primus (2019) and Noa Shein (2020), so Lin is not alone in suggesting that an individual's finitude cannot be inscribed in its essence. However, although the resulting interpretation seems right in general, it is hard to see how the thing is supposed to work in specific cases. The problem is especially acute in the case of finite bodies. Lin notes that, for Spinoza, 'Causal relationships are determined by essences' (155). As Spinoza himself puts it, the essence of thing a determines 'the power...or the striving by which it (either alone or with others) does anything' (EIIIp7d). However, he also claims that the mechanical properties of shape or figure all involve external determination and hence negation:

[H]e who says that he apprehends a figure, thereby means to indicate simply this, that he apprehends a determinate thing and the manner of its determination. This determination does not pertain to the thing in regard to its being; on the contrary, it is its non-being. So since figure is nothing but determination, and determination is negation, figure can be nothing other than negation, as has been said. (Ep. L, 260)

And on the face of it, the same rationale would apply to many of a body's mechanical properties—shape, as this passage emphasizes, but also determinations such as size and density. These properties turn out to be inessential. Thus, if causal relationships are explained by essences, it appears we must set aside such properties in our explanations of causal relationships. Yet this makes it hard to see what explanations *could* be offered. Why does that wooden wheel roll down the hill, while this wooden block just sits there? If we can't appeal to the respective shapes of the wheel, the block, and the hill, what story can possibly be told? (It is a cruel irony if the master of the geometrical method forecloses the use of geometry in physical explanations.) In this way, Lin's suggestion that the finitude—hence negation, hence figure—of a body is inessential to it rests uneasily with the essentialist model of causation. Of course, this is a far cry from the charge of acosmism. I take it to indicate a direction for future research rather than a failing of Lin's account.

A third path to idealism remains: the reduction of causation and inherence to conceptual dependence. This path has been mapped with care by Michael Della Rocca, drawing heavily upon the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Let us embark.

3.

Della Rocca writes,

both inherence and mere causation are kinds of dependence, but, for Spinoza, by virtue of his rationalism, they are ultimately the same kind of dependence, and that is conceptual dependence *tout court*. (Della Rocca 2008, 67)

Briefly, his argument runs as follows. Since everything has an explanation, it follows that facts of the form x causes y and x inheres in y must have explanations. (This is the PSR in action.) On pain of regress, such explanations can't themselves be given in terms of causation and inherence. And the only other available explanation is in terms of connections between the concept of x and the concept of y . So relations of causation and inherence are ultimately explained in terms of, and reduce to, conceptual dependence. In the end, it's just conceptual connections all the way down. To introduce any other sort of dependence would be to introduce a brute fact, contrary to the demands of the PSR.

Notice that the argument depends crucially not only on the PSR, but on a specific interpretation of it. It requires the principle that, to paraphrase Leibniz, every truth has a sufficient reason or explanation of its truth. Unlike Leibniz, Spinoza never says exactly this, but Della Rocca sees him relying on the principle at nearly every turn. So construed, the PSR is extraordinarily demanding. It makes explanation a serial relation ($\forall x \exists y Rxy$) on the domain of all truths. Thus any given truth must have an explanation, which must itself have an explanation in turn, and so on.

One of the most striking contributions of *Being and Reason* is Lin's sustained attack on this interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism. Both Lin and Della Rocca agree with the general slogan that, for Spinoza, everything is intelligible. But where Della Rocca takes this demand for explanation to apply to all truths whatsoever, Lin argues that it applies only to the domain of *existential* truths. On this reading, the canonical formulation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is given by Spinoza's claim that 'for each thing there must be assigned a cause, or reason, as much for its existence as for its nonexistence' (EIp11d2). In this and similar passages, Lin argues, the principle is clearly restricted to truths about the existence or nonexistence of things. Metaphysical truths—including truths about what causes what—need not have explanations. There is room for some brute facts in Spinoza's world.

Notably, this on its own would not be enough to get Lin out of the idealist quagmire if every truth is equivalent to some existential truth. And *prima facie*, it appears that for Spinoza, every truth is equivalent to some existential truth. The reason has to do with his view that particular things are merely modes of one and the same underlying substance. What does this mean? One influential reading is Jonathan Bennett's field metaphysic, which treats particular things as modes in the sense that they are local modifications of a single underlying manifold of space and time. Lin's view is very close to this, with a subtle but significant twist. Whereas Bennett takes modes to be properties insofar as they are instantiated by a substance, Lin holds that a mode is a substance (or subject) insofar as it satisfies some condition (113). Lin uses some examples that helpfully illustrate the point—for instance, a fist just is a hand insofar as it is clenched. The fist is not the property of *being clenched*, nor is it a property instance or trope. The fist is the hand itself, the subject of the property, insofar as it instantiates that property.

An apparent problem for Lin is that, on the face of it, this account of modes implies that every truth corresponds to the existence of some mode, and is thus equivalent to some existential

truth. For every truth p corresponds to a property, *being such that p* . And (again on the face of it) every such property corresponds to a condition satisfied by the one substance. For example, given that a causes b , there is a mode [substance insofar as it is such that a causes b]. Then, since every existential truth has an explanation, there must be an explanation not only for the existence of a and b , but also for the existence of the mode [substance insofar as a causes b]. That is, we need an explanation for why the causal connection obtains in the first place. But that was just the sort of explanatory demand that motivated Della Rocca's reduction. So, *prima facie*, the restriction of the PSR to existential truths changes nothing.

Lin replies to this objection by noting that not all conditions make modes. For example, conditions that belong to no specific attribute do not make modes. We know this because conditions like *being such that a mind exists and a body exists* do not correspond to any mode (168). Likewise, since relations such as causation and inherence are attribute-neutral, facts about these relations and their instances cannot be turned into mode-making conditions. There just is no mode [substance insofar as a causes b]. Hence the demand for explanation does not apply to the fact that a causes b after all. Generalizing from the case of causation, we may conclude that Spinoza's PSR is compatible with brute metaphysical truths about what depends on what. This in turn means there is no pressure to reduce them to conceptual dependence.

Lin's discussion of these matters is fascinating and pushes this debate in the right direction. Yet in order for this to be a satisfactory objection to Della Rocca's reduction argument, a more detailed account of these restrictions on mode-making is needed. The restrictions that Lin identifies (in particular, the requirement that mode-making conditions belong to some attribute) are not on their own sufficient to block the argument. Lin's argument establishes that facts of the form x causes y or x inheres in y do not correspond to any modes, since they would not be modes of any attribute. Yet as far as I can see, Della Rocca's argument can be revised to work with the causal relation that

structures any particular attribute. For example, suppose a pool cue communicates motion to a ball. The condition of *being such that the cue communicates motion to the ball* is one that can only be satisfied in Extension, so there's no reason that it couldn't correspond to a mode of extension. So such a mode exists. So we'll need an explanation for *why* the cue communicates motion to the ball. The idealist is once again off to the races.

This isn't a damning objection, but it does suggest that we need to hear more about what the restrictions on modemaking are. Lin does not take up this task: 'for our purposes,' he writes, 'it is not important to know exactly what the restrictions are' (168). However, I suspect that his defense of realism about dependence requires identifying some further restriction that goes beyond those he discusses in the book. Otherwise, the explanatory demands of the PSR (even restricted to existential truths) will be enough to push us down the path toward idealism.

4.

I have said little about Lin's method in *Being and Reason*, but it is worth remarking upon because it pushes against the recent tendency toward primarily contextual work in history of philosophy. Lin does take stock of Spinoza's historical context, his intellectual influences and relevant intellectual competitors. But he is also interested in 'whether or not [Spinoza] was right' (3). He uses the 'collegial method' (3): treat the author not merely as a historical relic, but as a colleague who has published a book you might learn something from—and who may also be deeply mistaken about certain things. As Lin rightly observes, achieving this goal still requires getting clear on what the author actually says. And this in turn requires no little historical research. (Though he uses concepts from Kripke to understand Spinoza's theory of attributes, he also argues persuasively that Spinoza's own philosophy of language has something like these concepts.) However, the ultimate

goal of such historical research isn't just to get a clearer idea of the historical context and significance of the author's writing. The ultimate goal is to learn some philosophical truths.

In her account of recent methodological trends in the study of early modern philosophy, Christia Mercer argues that contextualism has become dominant. Current scholarship, she writes, is bound by the contextualist principle she calls the Getting Things Right Constraint: 'historians of philosophy should not attribute claims or ideas to historical figures without concern for whether or not they are ones the figures would recognize as their own' (Mercer 2019, 530). Surprisingly, then, Lin's use of the collegial method is compatible with this contextualist constraint. After all, the constraint pertains only to the interpretation of historical texts. It says nothing about what we *do* with those interpretations. And after we've uncovered a historically plausible interpretation of an author's philosophical claims, one of the things we might reasonably want to do is to establish whether those claims are true.

Whatever suspicions one may harbor about our ability to discern the true from the false in historical works of philosophy, *Being and Reason* serves as a strong piece of evidence in defense of the collegial method. Lin sets out a plausible, historically informed interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysical system, but also scrutinizes that system with the eye of a contemporary philosopher. Though Lin is often critical of Spinoza, his criticism is typically well-argued and philosophically illuminating—a reminder of Bertrand Russell's remark, 'I would rather be reported by my bitterest enemy among philosophers than by a friend innocent of philosophy' (Russell 1945, 83). My overview here has barely scratched the surface of the insights that the book has to offer. Those of us writing philosophical works today could hope for no better treatment from future readers.

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