

Review of Melamed's *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*

Martin Lin

Rutgers University

Yitzhak Melamed's recently published book, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought*, is ambitious, challenging, and original. It presents a new interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics which digs deeply into the most important and yet difficult issues for understanding Spinoza, including the relationship between substance and mode, inherence, immanent causation, and the mind-body parallelism. The style is dense and Melamed does not shy away from engaging with the fine details of both Spinoza's text and recent scholarship. The book is thus pitched squarely at the expert seeking deeper understanding of hard issues and not the novice seeking an introduction to the basic ideas. Nevertheless, the prose is clear and well organized so that difficult ideas are never made needlessly more difficult by faulty exposition.

Part of Melamed's method appears to be to assume that, although on the surface Spinoza's text may contain obscurities or inconsistencies, there is always a deeper account that clarifies and resolves. That is, the text is often merely the tip of an iceberg the shape of which can be recovered by careful extrapolation. There is no question that such a method can produce useful results as evidenced by Melamed's book. But my own view is that such extrapolations are interesting mainly because they show along what lines the explicit ideas an author might be developed and not because it reveals the underlying philosophy. I normally assume that if an author has not written in detail about a given topic, it is because she has not thought about that topic in detail. Moreover, stubborn apparent inconsistencies that generations of interpreters have not succeeding in resolving (at least not uncontroversially) are generally real inconsistencies. After all, even philosophers as great as Spinoza do not think out every detail of their ideas, make errors, and fail to notice problems. That said, we should explore ways that an author could have developed her ideas in greater detail in ways consistent with her explicit comments. Just as we should also explore ways that she could have solved difficulties that require only relatively minor adjustments of her views. Such activities shed light on the philosophical potential of a set of ideas. And so, while I might not agree with what I take to be some of Melamed's methodological assumptions, I do believe that they have led him in some very interesting and worthwhile directions. I also, however, believe that in certain cases they may have led him astray. In what remains, I will look more closely at some of those directions. Although I have learned a great deal from this excellent book, the nature of a review being what it is, I will, naturally, focus mainly on where I disagree with it.

Two Parallelisms

In many respects, we can see Spinoza's guiding assumptions as broadly speaking Cartesian. He is trying, one might say, to develop a metaphysics that is more authentically Cartesian than that of Descartes himself. But, on a few key issues, he emphatically rejects core Cartesian principles and develops his metaphysics in an entirely different direction. To be sure, in many instances, he does so with an eye on improving on the Cartesian framework that he takes over. But doing so leads him to sometimes adopt positions that Descartes himself would find objectionable. One such issue is mind-body interaction. According to Descartes, the mind and the body are distinct substances that have nothing in common. And yet Descartes maintains that the mind and body do causally interact. How can two such disparate substances interact? Descartes was sanguine regarding this question. They interact in virtue of causal laws ordained by God. Since such laws depend only on God's good pleasure, there is no barrier in principle to such laws relating substances as heterogeneous can be. This solution, whatever philosophical merits it might have, did not, in general, please other seventeenth century philosophers that were otherwise sympathetic to the Cartesian program. Among progressive early modern philosophers, a wide array of alternative accounts of the mind-body problem were developed. Many of the most prominent denied interaction. But denying interaction is not easy. You stab me and I feel pain. It seems obvious that your physical stabbing *causes* my mental sensation of pain. How could one maintain otherwise? Occasionalists deny that there are any genuine causal interactions between finite substances like minds and bodies. Instead, for example, your stabbing is the occasion for God to cause my pain. Leibniz developed the "pre-established" harmony according to which there only appears to be mind-body interaction because mental events and physical events are appropriately correlated by God in his wisdom when he creates the world. Spinoza develops what commentators have called "the parallelism doctrine."

The parallelism doctrine is in many ways the precursor to Leibniz's pre-established harmony. Like that doctrine, the parallelism holds that there is the appearance of mind-body interaction because the mental and physical are correlated without interacting. But this correlation is not the product of divine wisdom. Instead, it is somehow the inevitable product of the way the natural world unfolds from the essence of *Natura naturans*. "The order and connection of ideas is the same," Spinoza asserts in 2p7, "as the order and connection of things." That is, everything is represented by some idea and there is no idea whose object does not exist. What is more, the causal structure of ideas is the same as the causal structure of things. Thus, when your stabbing rends my flesh, a chain of physical causes is initiated that results in a certain brain state. The idea of that brain state is my sensation of pain. The appearance of mind-body interaction is explained by this causal isomorphism between thought (the attribute of mind) and extension (the attribute of body). What does Spinoza think justifies this doctrine?

Spinoza cites only his causal axiom (1a4) in support of it, but most commentators agree that 1a4 alone can get Spinoza only a part of the way there. One fascinating aspect of Spinoza's theory that may help close the gap is found in the scholium to 2p7 where Spinoza says that the mind is identical to the body. If mind and body are one and the same thing conceived under different attributes, then perhaps their shared causal structure is not so mysterious after all. All of this is pretty standard fare among Spinoza commentators. Perhaps we could even call it "the received wisdom" on the parallelism.

Melamed challenges this received wisdom. While previous commentators speak of "*the* parallelisms doctrine" Melamed alleges that there is no one doctrine that deserves that name. Instead, there are *two* distinct and independent parallelisms that have been previously conflated. The first doctrine is what Melamed calls the "ideas-things parallelism." The ideas-things parallelism, Melamed argues, is asserted in 1p7 (and is not discussed in 1p7s). It says that the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. "The order and connection" that Spinoza speaks of is interpreted by Melamed in the customary way as a structural isomorphism. That is: (1) for every idea there is a thing and for every *res* (thing) there is an idea; and (2) the causal structure of thought is isomorphic to the causal structure of all things falling under a given attribute. The second doctrine is what Melamed calls the "inter-attributes parallelism." The inter-attributes parallelism, Melamed argues, says that the order and connection of all the attributes is the same.

Melamed argues that these are two distinct and independent doctrines. Let us consider first the question of their distinctness. According to Melamed, the two parallelisms say different things. The ideas-things parallelism says that ideas represent the modes parallel to them. The inter-attribute parallelism takes no stand on whether or not parallel modes represent one another. The inter-attribute parallelism asserts that parallel modes are identical whereas the ideas-things parallelism is silent on this question. The ideas-things parallelism entails that there are ideas of ideas (because ideas are things and the ideas-things claims that there is an idea of everything) but the inter-attribute parallelism is consistent with there being no such ideas of ideas. The inter-attribute parallelism entails that extension is parallel to any attribute including the infinitely many unknown attributes, whereas the ideas-things parallelism does not. They overlap in that they both entail mind-body parallelism.

He also argues that the two doctrines are logically independent. Spinoza argues for them on the basis of different ground and the truth of one does not entail the truth of the other. We will return to this question presently.

Is it plausible to think that Spinoza intended to express two distinct parallelism doctrines in 2p7, 2p7d, 2p7c and 2p7s? If he did, then he expressed himself very poorly indeed since none of his readers, from the seventeenth century until just before Melamed, have suspected him of doing so. Of course, it is sometimes explicable and even predictable that a writer is misunderstood by a large portion of his readership.

Great innovators are often misunderstood by their contemporaries. New ideas or theories are hard to absorb if they substantially depart from what came before. Sometimes, it is not until subsequent generations have caught up to them are the ideas and theories of innovators fully appreciated. But I suspect that this scenario is more rare than it is sometimes supposed. Surely, the most sophisticated contemporaries can see what an innovator is up to. Plato had his Aristotle and Frege had his Russell. What is more common is that future generations lose touch with the background assumptions made by a writer and this missing context results in misinterpretation. It is, for example, quite reasonable to suppose that, in general, seventeenth century authors were more familiar with scholastic (especially seventeenth century scholastic) thought than we are today, and consequently, there may be occasions where our lack of familiarity leads us astray. But what if an author has been understood by no one as Melamed alleges is the case with Spinoza with respect to the parallelism? Neither his contemporaries nor any subsequent reader have correctly grasped his meaning. And this is not merely a fine matter of interpretative detail but rather a gross conflation of two entirely distinct doctrines. Of course, this is not at all impossible. Indeed, it would not be surprising if it were somewhat common. Such authors will have expressed themselves very poorly but, sadly, we know that authors often express themselves poorly. Indeed, Spinoza frequently has baffled his readers with an obscure phrase or statement. But under such conditions the interpreter is in a difficult position. When a thinker expresses herself that poorly, no interpretation is obviously correct. If it were, we wouldn't say that the author was unclear.

I would say that the text that discuss the parallelism (or the parallelisms) do suffer from such lack of clarity. They resist uncontroversial interpretation. The argument for 2p7 is conspicuously underdeveloped and under explained. Indeed, it appears, on the face of it, to be obviously invalid. Its corollary, 2p appears to be a non-sequitur. And the connection of 2p7s to what precedes it is entirely unclear. This is the textual situation that Melamed faces.

### Two Orders and Connections?

At first glance, Melamed's contention that the two parallelisms is vulnerable to the objection that the ideas-things parallelism entails the inter-attributes parallelism. Consider the following claims to which Spinoza appears to be committed. The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things. Every mode is a thing. There are infinitely many attributes. Thus the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of the modes of any attribute. Identity is transitive. Thus if the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of modes of extension and the same as the order and connection of the modes of an

unknown attribute, *A*, then the order and connection of modes of extension is the same as the order and connection of modes of *A*.

Melamed considers this objection and responds by saying that we are not entitled to assume the very same modes of thought that are parallel to modes of extension are the very same modes that parallel the modes of other attributes. Of course, Spinoza does believe that they are identical but, Melamed alleges, he does so because he believes the inter-attribute parallelism. That is, there might be a chain of ideas that parallels the chain of bodies (modes of extension) and another, entirely distinct, chain of ideas that parallels the chain of modes of *A*. Without assuming the inter-attribute parallelism, we cannot rule this out.

Does the above described scenario count as one in which “*the* order and connection” is the same? If each of these chains of ideas have a different order and connection, then wouldn’t the modes of each attribute merely be the same as *an* order and connection of ideas? Perhaps Melamed could respond that *the* order and connection exhibited by all the attributes taken together is the same as *the* order and connection of all the distinct chains of ideas taken together. This seems to me that this would be a satisfactory response.

There is, however, a related but potentially more serious problem. I’m not entirely sure whether this is a problem for Melamed or a problem for Spinoza, but it is, it seems to me, a problem nonetheless. Let us adopt Jonathan Bennett’s notation according to which ‘*I*(*x*)’ refers to the idea that represents *x*. Let us also add the following notation: ‘*G<sub>e</sub>*’ refers to God insofar as he is extended and ‘*G<sub>t</sub>*’ refers to God insofar as he is thinking. Suppose that the initial stages of the order and connection of extended things looks like this: *G<sub>e</sub>* causes *e<sub>1</sub>* which in turn causes *e<sub>2</sub>*. At this point the causal chain branches and *e<sub>2</sub>* causes both *e<sub>3</sub>* and *e<sub>4</sub>*. Now let us look at the initial stages of the order and connection of thinking things. *G<sub>t</sub>* causes *I*(*G<sub>e</sub>*), which causes (*e<sub>1</sub>*), which causes *I*(*e<sub>2</sub>*). At this point the causal chain branches and *I*(*e<sub>2</sub>*) causes *I*(*e<sub>3</sub>*) and *I*(*e<sub>4</sub>*). You might think that already there is a problem because the while the second mode of in the chain of extended causes branches, the third mode in the chain of modes of thought branches. But remember that the ideas-things parallelism relates ideas, which are modes of thought, to things, which can be either substances or modes. We count, therefore, only modes of thought but both the substances and modes to which those ideas are parallel. The third *thing* in the chain of extended causes branches and the third *mode* of thought branches. This what we should expect. But now let us ascend to the ideas of ideas. Ideas are themselves things, so there must be ideas of them. There must also be an idea of the first cause of the chain of thinking things, i.e., *G<sub>t</sub>*. Here is the order and connection of causes of ideas of ideas: *I*(*G<sub>t</sub>*), which causes *I*(*I*(*G<sub>e</sub>*)), which causes *I*(*I*(*e<sub>1</sub>*)), which causes *I*(*I*(*e<sub>2</sub>*)). Now the fourth mode in the chain of causes of ideas of ideas branches. Can the order and connection of ideas of ideas be the same as the order and connection of thinking things or of extended things if the forth link of the former and the

third link of the latter two are the first causes to branch? On most reasonable interpretations of “same order and connection,” the answer is no.

The above scenario makes a number of assumptions. Could Melamed or Spinoza resist any of them? The first assumption is that the first mode in the chain of thinking causes is the idea of God insofar as he is a thinking thing. If we assume that the first mode of thinking is of the first mode of extension, that is, we assume that ‘things’ in 2p7 is restricted to modes, then the problem goes away. The second assumption is that the order of causes is not dense. If the chains are dense, then it does not make sense to speak of, for example, the third item in the causal chain. The third assumption is that causal chains can branch.

Let us examine these assumptions, starting with the third. Causal chains do branch. The throwing of the baseball caused the window to break and it also caused the batter to swing and miss. The causal chains described above are most naturally interpreted as chains whose links are infinite modes. Is there any reason to assume that causal chains of infinite modes can’t branch? I can’t think of one. Indeed, on many plausible interpretations of the infinite modes, they must branch. Don Garrett, for example, has proposed that formal essences are infinite modes. If so, it is not plausible that any formal essences are the causes of other formal essences. Presumably, all the formal essences have the same cause. Hence there is branching.

Concerning the second assumption, the idea that the causal order is dense seems paradoxical. Causation requires, it is reasonable to suppose, that every cause immediately causes at least one effect. Otherwise, all causation is mediate. I find it hard to make sense of such an alleged possibility.

The last assumption is that the immediate infinite mode (i.e., the first mode of thought) is the idea of God. Melamed argues in his book in favor of this assumption. There is, indeed, much textual evidence in favor of Melamed’s interpretation, but perhaps it could be, nevertheless, resisted. This would require interpreting ‘things’ in 2p7 as restricted to modes. The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of modes of any attribute. In this case the first link in the chain of ideas of ideas would be the idea of the immediate infinite mode of any attribute. Any causal branching would take place at the same link of at any level of ideas. What then is the idea of God that Spinoza talks about in 2p4 and elsewhere? Perhaps the idea of God is just the attribute of thought itself. Alternatively, it could be that it is the immediate infinite mode of thought (just as Melamed thinks) but that its object is, in the first instance, the immediate infinite mode of extension and represents God’s essence just insofar as every mode of thought represents God’s essence (in virtue of modes being expressions of God’s essence).

But if the order and connections are the same, then the inter-attributes parallelism entails the ideas-things parallelism.

## Idea Aspects

Another ingenious thesis that Melamed defends in his book concerns one of the most difficult and puzzling topics in Spinoza. How can there be ideas that represents all the modes of infinitely many attributes? Spinoza thinks that thought and extension are only two of an infinity of attributes. There is a chain of ideas that represents the chain of extended things. As we have discussed, these chains are isomorphic. But there are also chains of modes in infinitely other attributes. According to the ideas-things parallelism, there must be ideas that represent those modes. Spinoza also maintains that we are ignorant of attributes other than thought and extension. But according to the inter-attributes parallelism, my body, for example, is identical to all the modes under all the other attributes to which it is parallel. If my mind is the idea of my body and my body is identical to modes under infinitely many other attributes, how is it that I fail to have knowledge of attributes other than thought and extension?

Many commentators have taken the doctrine of infinite attributes to be a misstep on Spinoza's part. It looks to make the attribute of thought more fulsome than any other attribute and that appears to violate the parallelism. Melamed does not shy away from this conclusion, but rather he attempts to show that this additional fulsomeness is not incompatible with the parallelism or any other part of Spinoza's metaphysics. To understand his solution, we first have to discuss Melamed's understanding of how the modes of different attributes relate to one another. They are all, for him, aspects of a single mode. That is, the Napoleon's body, Napoleon's mind, and the modes parallel to Napoleon's mind and body under all the unknown attributes together constitute a single mode, which Melamed calls a mode of God. The relationship between a mode of God and its aspects (mind, body, etc.) is analogous to the relationship between God and his attributes (God insofar as he is extended, God insofar as he is thinking, etc.). Now Melamed conjectures that each idea is itself infinitely faceted. It has aspects that separately represent all the modes parallel to it under the various attributes. That is to say, the idea parallel to, for example, Napoleon's body has infinitely many aspects. One aspect is Napoleon's mind and it represents his body. The other aspects represent the modes parallel to Napoleon's body under different attributes. These idea-aspects are causally and conceptually separated from each other just as the various aspects of modes of God are causally and conceptually separated from each other (although to a lesser degree).

This is an ingenious solution but it raises a serious question. What are aspects? Spinoza sets out his basic ontological categories in 1d3-1d5. They include substance, attribute, and mode. Aspects, if there are such things for Spinoza, are definitely not substances or attributes because they are not conceived through themselves. Rather they must be conceived through God. Substances and attributes, however, are

conceived through themselves. Therefore, aspects are not substances or attributes. But neither can they be modes because then they would fail to solve the very problem that Melamed set out to solve: that the attribute of thought has more modes than the other attributes and thus is not isomorphic to the other attributes. We must conclude, therefore that, if there are aspects, then there is an ontological category that Spinoza simply failed to mention when he introduces the other categories in 1d3-1d5. What is more, if there is an additional category of aspect, what distinguishes it from the category of mode? Aspects are, presumably, in and conceived through another, just like modes. What other further characteristics do aspects possess that distinguish them from modes?

As serious as the problems facing aspects are, I am willing to confess that Melamed's solution to the problem that results from Spinoza's doctrine of the infinite attributes is the best of which I am aware. But what are we to make of the doctrine of infinite unknown attributes itself? There is no doubt that Spinoza held it and that it was important to him. He asserts it again and again, even in the face of tough criticism from Tschirnhaus. I think, nevertheless, Spinoza's reasons for believing it are weak. First of all, he simply defines God as a substance with infinitely many attributes (1d6). But what motivates this definition? The underlying justification seems to be the thought expressed in 1p9: the more reality something has the more attributes it has. God is the most real being. Therefore, God has infinitely many attributes. But of course the conclusion does not follow from the premises. The most we ought to conclude is that God has every possible attribute. It does not appear that this line of reasoning could tell us how many possible attributes there are.

It does not appear, therefore, that Spinoza had good reasons for believing the doctrine of God's infinite unknown attributes. It does not even appear, despite its importance for him, to have thought very carefully about it. When Tschirnhaus questions him directly about it, his answers are defensive and evasive. He does not appear to *want* to think very carefully about it.

Faced with this situation, what is the interpreter to do? One option is to admit that the doctrine of infinite unknown attributes is ill conceived and makes trouble for the rest of Spinoza's metaphysics. Given that Spinoza doesn't need the doctrine, it seems permissible to acknowledge that Spinoza holds it, but then politely ignore it for the purpose of understanding and preserving the rest of Spinoza's system. This is my preferred option and it reflects the methodological assumptions I articulated at the beginning of this review. Another option is to assume that the trouble that the doctrine of infinite unknown attributes appears to make for the rest of Spinoza's metaphysics is a product of the fact that Spinoza does not fully articulate the rest of his metaphysics. If we carefully read between the lines and reflect upon what the rest of the metaphysics has to look like in order to cohere with the doctrine of infinite unknown attributes, we can reconstruct the fuller metaphysical picture that lurks beneath the surface of the text. This

is, I believe, Melamed's approach when he concludes that Spinoza must believe in idea-aspects in order to make sense of his claim that there are modes of unknown attributes that are nevertheless represented in the attribute of thought.

The clear advantage of Melamed's approach is that it allows him to respect each and every text. He does not have to deny anything that Spinoza says (controlling for an evolution of views over his lifetime). The disadvantage is that he must attribute to Spinoza views that he never explicitly states (i.e., that there are idea-aspects). The advantage of my approach, in contrast, is that we need not credit Spinoza with any views that he nowhere develops explicitly in writing. The downside is that we fail to take seriously everything that Spinoza does explicitly writes. I do not think that this downside is all that unpalatable. After all, it does possess the advantage of a certain psychological realism. Most, if not all philosophers have some beliefs that are not well justified and conflict with some of their well-justified beliefs. In the end, however, I do not think that it is possible to decide the issue decisively. These kinds of methodological issues are the kinds of things about which reasonable people can disagree.

Let me conclude by saying that Melamed's book is important and original. It is certain to spark intense debate among experts. There is little question in my mind that it furthers our understanding of Spinoza by bravely tackling straight on some of his most cryptic and confounding doctrines. It is rigorously argued and deeply sensitive to textual detail. It is compulsory reading for all serious students of Spinoza.