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Spinoza's Metaphysics and His Relationship To Hegel and the German Idealists

Interview by Richard Marshall

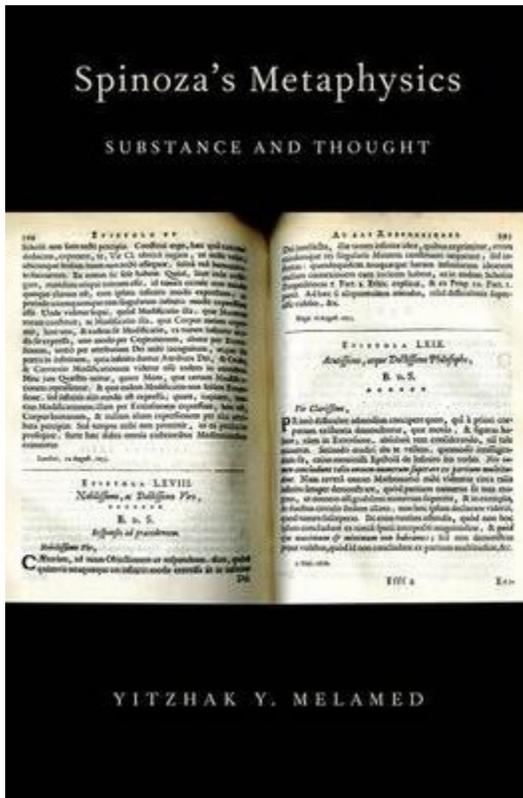


[Yitzhak Melamed](#) works at the intersection of philosophy (primarily metaphysics), Jewish and religious studies, the history of science, and the humanities in general. He focuses on foundational questions, which he aspires to approach with both philosophical and historical rigor. In particular, he is interested in well-argued views that are commonly treated as “counter-intuitive”; such views, he thinks, may help us challenge our own well-fortified beliefs, force us to motivate what we deem to be obvious, and reveal our conceptual blind spots. Here he discusses Spinoza’s overall project, monism and how to understand [Spinoza’s](#) version of it, infinite modes, metaphysics, God, Thought, Thought-Being dualism, Spinoza’s relationship with German Idealism, German Idealism as a combination of [Spinoza](#) and Kant, his rationalism and German Idealism, Herder and Spinoza, *determinatio est negatio* and Hegel, and what Spinoza might have thought about German Idealism.

3:AM: What made you become a philosopher?

Yitzhak Melamed: It is not easy to avoid self-deception in answering such questions, but I’ll do my best. I grew up in Bney Brak, one of the two major ultra-Orthodox cities in Israel. It is a city that on the one hand is the poorest in the country (at least in the Jewish sector — some Israeli-Arab towns are just as poor, and obviously the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories is far poorer), but on the other hand has the highest number of books per household. My parents immigrated from Russia a year before I was born, and the home I was raised in combined ultra-Orthodox learning and values with Russian cultural norms (such as piano playing). I studied in a modern-Orthodox school, but I also belonged to a Hassidic ultra-Orthodox community. I had one foot in both worlds, but I was also an outsider in both. This feeling of being an outsider makes you wonder about accepted norms, and I assume it contributed to my willingness, even eagerness, to question accepted views.

I also had a wonderful Talmudist as my primary teacher during my four years of middle school. There was nothing this teacher would appreciate more than a good question, and I enjoyed asking questions (and still do). I doubt he would be happy to learn that he had a role in my turn to philosophy, but most probably, for better or worse, he is at least partly culpable. Then, at the beginning of my high school/Yeshiva I started reading philosophy (I think it was Plato and Nietzsche), and I just got hooked.



3:AM: You're an expert in the philosophy of [Spinoza](#). So to begin with can you sketch what you take to be Spinoza's overall philosophical project?

YYM: Spinoza is a highly systematic thinker, but still I do not think I can offer a single key for all things Spinozistic. Personally, one thing which got me excited about Spinoza is his philosophical boldness, i.e., his willingness to pursue philosophical exploration as far as he can, making very little concessions to commonly accepted beliefs and norms. In terms of content, I take his attempt to conceive of God, nature, and ethics in a manner that is free from anthropomorphism and anthropocentric illusions as one of the deepest elements of his philosophical thinking. A closely related issue is his advocacy of actual infinity (an issue that has been mostly neglected in recent literature). Finally, the very attempt to do philosophy systematically (rather than rely on fragmented and disassociated intuitions) and transparently (laying bare the logical structure of his arguments) commands my respect, indeed admiration.

3:AM: You take issue with other interpretations of his monism. Can you say what monism is in Spinoza and how previous interpreters have understood it?

YYM: In a sense, Spinoza's answer to the question "What is there?" is extremely short: God. For this reason, Salomon Maimon, the extraordinary late eighteenth-century philosopher, coined the term "acosmism" to describe Spinoza's views. Maimon's aim was to counter the charge of atheism that was thrown at Spinoza as a commonly used term of abuse in the eighteenth century. For Maimon, Spinoza's acosmism which asserts that only God exists (while the world of finite things is not real) is diametrically opposed to atheism. In this context, Maimon presents Leibniz's theism as a mere compromise between acosmism and atheism, insofar as it asserts that both God and the world of finite things exists (I am sure that Maimon's contemporary Leibnizians were thrilled to learn that they were more atheists than Spinoza...).

This view of Spinoza was adopted, somewhat developed, and then widely propagated by Hegel. Now, I have much sympathy for this reading of Spinoza since I find the view of Spinoza as an atheist pretty absurd (unless one adopts an Inquisitional conception of God, and then charges Spinoza with failing to comply with this conception). Yet, unlike the Maimon-Hegel reading, I do not think that Spinoza denied the reality of finite things. Both Hegel and Maimon read Spinoza as a certain kind of modern Eleatic philosopher who denied the reality of any plurality or change. Michael Della Rocca, my former teacher, has recently argued that for Spinoza finite things are less real than God, and I tend to agree with this claim. Still, I think, the reading developed by Maimon and Hegel was more radical: it denied the reality of anything but God. If you look at McTaggart's 1908 *Mind* article on the unreality of time, you will see that he too considers Spinoza as denying the reality of time and change.

3:AM: So why do you disagree with this view and what is your preferred view?

YYM: In some recent articles, I have pointed out several textual and conceptual problems with this reading of Spinoza. Instead of repeating these arguments here, let me suggest one consideration which might, perhaps, suffice to refute this view. Spinoza defines God as "being absolutely infinite," and we have clear evidence that, for Spinoza, infinity is a quantitative notion. It is also clear (pace Jonathan Bennett) that, for Spinoza, 'infinite x' does not simply mean 'all x,' since Spinoza repeatedly argues that the infinite cannot be constructed from the finite. Furthermore, in his 'Letter on the Infinite,' Spinoza criticizes the Aristotelian ban on actual infinity, and openly defends this notion. Now, the definition of God at the opening of the *Ethics* is not a text you can cut out of the work since virtually the entire edifice of the book relies on it. And if this definition asserts of God absolute plurality (i.e., having infinitely many attributes, each of which is infinite in its own kind), I am not sure how much room is left for the claim that Spinoza denied the reality of any plurality.

All that said, I definitely understand and to some extent share the excitement about the acosmist reading. It is bold, clean, and elegant, and it gives an easy solution to the delicate question of Spinoza's view on the reality of duration (what we usually call 'time'). When I began studying this issue about fifteen years ago, ontological monism was not a respectable view. When I sent my first piece on Hegel's acosmist reading of Spinoza to a journal, one of the readers noted that it is not charitable to ascribe such a crazy view to a "great past philosopher such as Spinoza." I was able to address this concern without taming Hegel's claims, and the paper was accepted. The reputation of ontological monism changed pretty dramatically since then. My primary lesson from that experience, however, was that I should be highly suspicious of the use of charity in interpreting past philosophers, and that "crazy" views still require an argument in order to be refuted.

Going back to your original question, I take Spinoza to be a substance monist, and a radical pluralist of attributes (and modes). Since Spinoza strictly identifies God's essence and existence, and since the attributes are the basic, adequate conceptions of God's essence, I take the attributes as the fundamental kinds of existence. Spinoza is committed to the view that there are infinitely many kinds of existence (though we know of only two).

3:AM: A question you raise is if he didn't write about his 'infinite modes' what would go wrong in his metaphysics? So what are these 'infinite modes' and how do they secure his metaphysical vision?

YYM: The infinite modes are infinite wholes. Unlike the attributes, which are also infinite, the infinite modes are divisible. Usually, Spinoza borrows his philosophical terminology from his predecessors and then defines these terms similarly, but not identically, to the way his predecessors did. In the case of the terminology of 'infinite modes' we can hardly find any precedents. Thus, we should wonder

why he introduced this notion.

The oddity of these entities was salient to Spinoza's contemporaries and in his late correspondence he was asked to provide examples of infinite modes. In response, Spinoza names God's infinite intellect as example of an infinite mode of the attribute of thought, and "motion and rest [motus et quies]" and the "face of the whole universe [facies totius universi]" as examples of infinite modes of the attribute of extension. We know more or less what Spinoza means by "infinite intellect," since he elaborates on this issue both in the *Ethics* and in his correspondence (roughly, it is the totality of true ideas ordered in causal relations isomorphic with the causal relations among the objects of these ideas), but we know very little as to what precisely he means by "motion and rest" and almost nothing about the "face of the whole universe." Much of the previous literature about this subject attempted to speculate what precisely Spinoza meant by these last two terms. These suggestions – for example, that these two infinite modes are powers or, alternatively, laws of nature – are interesting, but they have very little support in the text. What I tried to do is to bypass the question of the precise meaning of these tags, and instead to extract from Spinoza's text the structural features of the infinite modes in general, i.e., to spell out what are the common characteristics of all infinite modes. Scrutinizing Spinoza's claims we can point out quite a detailed list of such common features, and these features can now serve as constraints on possible interpretations of the specific infinite modes in each attribute.

At this point, an obvious question to raise is: what precisely is the function of the infinite modes within Spinoza's system, or, in other words, what would go wrong in the absence of these entities? My argument is that the infinite modes are just boundless wholes (or if you like a metaphor: "infinite seas") whose parts are the various finite things we experience. Now, Spinoza is committed to the claim that two things are part of the same whole if and only if these things "adapt themselves to one another." Thus, if we wish to have a system which encompasses, for example, all bodies, there must be an infinite whole whose parts are all bodies, and this infinite whole must be an infinite mode (it cannot be an attribute because the attributes have no parts). We can push this question further and ask why there cannot be causally isolated bodies, but I am not sure to what extent it would interest our readers. A similar point can be made about each of the other infinite modes.



3:AM: Another question you raise is about Spinoza's God. God has infinite attributes but according to Spinoza we only know two of them – Extension and Thought. Why do we only know two of them?

YYM: This is an important yet difficult issue, and I will do my best to provide a concise answer. Spinoza defines God, at the opening of the *Ethics*, as a substance having infinitely many attributes. At the beginning of the second part of the *Ethics*, he provides (shaky) proofs that extension and thought are two of God's attributes. Throughout the rest of the book, he occasionally gestures at attributes other than thought and extension (showing, for example, that the causal order of modes within each of the attributes – extension, thought, and the unknown attributes – is one and the same). Yet, apart from some structural features that are shared by all the attributes, Spinoza tells us nothing about the other attributes and the question is: why? We can ascertain the beginnings of an answer in Spinoza's preface to the second part of the *Ethics*, where Spinoza announces that after presenting the general outline of his metaphysics in part one, he will now zoom in and concentrate only on "those things that can lead us, by the hand, as it were, to the knowledge of the human Mind and its highest blessedness." Presumably, the knowledge of the other attributes is simply irrelevant to the knowledge of the human and its blessedness, as Spinoza conceives the human being as a pair of modes: an extended mode, or body, and a mode of thought, or mind. Still, this answer is not fully satisfying since we would like to know why knowledge of the other attributes is not relevant to the knowledge of the human mind. Furthermore, the complete absence of discussion of the nature of the unknown attributes gives the reader the (right!) impression that it is not an accident that we do not know the other attributes. In one of the axioms at the beginning of part two of the *Ethics* Spinoza indeed affirms that we cannot know any attributes other than thought and extension, and he repeats this claim in his correspondence. Now, claims about what one cannot know are strong claims, and they had better be backed by solid arguments. In the Spinoza scholarship of the past three centuries readers either dismissed these claims

as unintelligible or took them for granted. In my book, I show that Spinoza had solid reasons for holding that one cannot know more than two attributes, and that he spelled out these reasons in a letter that has been poorly understood so far.

In order to understand Spinoza's reasons we need to consider only two key doctrines. The one is what Della Rocca calls the causal and conceptual barrier among the attributes, i.e., the claim that items belonging to different attributes cannot cause one another and cannot explain one another. Thus, for example, Spinoza famously denies that a mind and its body can causally interact (or explain one another). The second doctrine is the Ideas-Things Parallelism which Spinoza asserts in proposition 7 of part two. According to this latter doctrine, there is a strict isomorphism between the causal order of things and the causal order of the ideas representing all things.

The causal and conceptual barrier among the attributes establishes a strict regime in which modes of different attributes are causally and conceptually severed from each other. Then, when we bring in the Ideas-Things Parallelism, it becomes clear that in addition to the barrier among the attributes, there is a second barrier among the ideas representing modes of different attributes. In other words, ideas of extension and ideas of modes of the third (and unknown) attribute must be causally and explanatorily severed from each other, just as their ideata (or objects) are. Now, let's suppose that I could have an idea of one mode (call it: x) of one of the infinitely many attributes other than thought and extension (call this attribute: xAtt). This would mean that an idea of x could be part of my mind which is an idea of a body. Thus, certain features of my mind would be explained by the idea of x. However, my mind is an idea of a body, and an idea of a mode of extension would be explained by an idea of a mode of xAtt. But given the Ideas-Things Parallelism, if the idea of a mode of extension is explained by an idea of a mode of xAtt, then the same explanatory relation would obtain among the objects of these two ideas, i.e., certain features of my body would be explained by x. But this flatly contradicts the explanatory barrier among the attributes.

3:AM: And if Thought somehow contains all the other attributes, how can its order and structure be the same as the others, given that they are blind to one another?

YYM: The attribute of thought represents all the infinitely many attributes (in the lingo of the seventeenth century, one could restate the last claim as the assertion that Thought contains all the attributes objectively). This element gives Thought a certain priority over the other attributes, not in the sense that the other attributes depend on Thought (as this would bring about the collapse of the barrier among the attributes), but rather in the sense that the order of Thought-items perfectly parallels the order of everything that is. In this sense, Thought is far richer and more elaborate than any other attribute. One figure who was well aware of this important feature of Spinoza's ontology is [Leibniz](#). Following his meeting with Spinoza, he writes in his notes: "He [Spinoza] thinks that there are infinite other positive attributes besides thought and extension. But in all of them there is thought, as here there is in extension. What they are like is not conceivable by us; every one is infinite in its own kind, like space here." Leibniz's formulation is a bit imprecise (Thought is not "in" any other attributes, but rather accompanies all attributes), but he got the big picture absolutely right: Spinoza's world is an infinite multiverse. Each universe is constituted by one non-Thought attribute, and the infinite, causally ordered, structure of ideas representing that attribute. Thus, Thought is present in each universe. Add to that Spinoza's claims that these infinitely many universes are causally and conceptually independent, and that they are expressions (or I would say: aspects) of one and the same reality, and you get, I think, an adequate outline of Spinoza's ontology.

By claiming that all the other attributes are “blind” (this terminology was coined by Martial Gueroult), we mean that they are not about something, or that they are not intentional. Intentionality, for Spinoza, is the essential feature of Thought. I use this essential feature of ideas in arguing that what came to be known over the past century and a half as “Spinoza’s Doctrine of Parallelism” is in fact a late conflation of two somewhat similar, yet clearly distinct and independent, claims of Spinoza. The one asserts an isomorphism between the order of ideas and the order of everything that is. The other claims that the order of modes in each of the infinitely many attributes is one and the same. In order to prove that these two parallelism doctrines are distinct, I point out a series of features that pull the doctrines apart, i.e., features that belong to one doctrine but not the other. Thus, I argue, the Ideas-Things Parallelism is intentional (i.e., of every pair of parallel items, one item is about the other), while the Inter-Attributes Parallelism is not.

Now the fact that Thought seems to have a privileged status among the attributes has bothered scholars for quite a long time. On the face of it, Thought is supposed to be (and indeed is) just one of the infinitely many attributes, and the order of modes of Thought is supposed (according to the Inter-Attributes Parallelism) to map onto the order of modes in each of the infinitely many other attributes. How then can it adequately represent all of the attributes together? My answer, in a nutshell, is that modes of Thought, unlike modes of the other attributes, are infinitely faceted. Each mode of Thought (i.e., an idea) has infinitely many facets or aspects, so that the infinitely many aspects of the same idea represent all the modes which parallel the idea in the infinitely many attributes. Thus, there is a bijection between the set of all idea-aspects and the set of everything that is (universal set), but even more importantly, the causal order of all idea-aspects maps precisely on the causal order of all things. I think I can also soundly document these claims in Spinoza’s text (though obviously, he would not use the terms ‘bijection’ or ‘aspect’).

3:AM: What is significant about your view that Spinoza has an attributal dualism pervading his substance monism for Spinoza’s relationship with German Idealism?

YYM: I read Spinoza as a Thought-Being dualist, not an attribute dualist (though some readers of Spinoza – including, apparently, Hegel – thought that Spinoza is not committed to the existence of any attributes other than Thought and Extension, a reading which I find utterly untenable). In a sense, Schelling reads Spinoza as a Thought-Being dualist, but for all I can tell, Schelling never looked at the issue of the parallelisms with any high resolution. Incidentally, of the two scholars who previously gestured in the direction of the interpretation I suggest – Joel Friedman and Martial Gueroult — Gueroult considers the first steps in that direction, but then withdraws and notes: “C’est ne pas Spinoza. C’est Schelling!” Well, whether it’s Schelling or not we may discuss, but I’m pretty sure it is Spinoza.

The reading I suggest grants Thought obvious preeminence in Spinoza’s world, and this is clearly something the German Idealists would be highly sympathetic to. I do not think, however, that Spinoza is a reductive idealist, but, with the exception of the early Maimon, neither is it clear to me that the German Idealists were reductive idealists.



3:AM: So is it right to think of German Idealism as a synthesis of the fundamental ideas of Spinoza and Kant?

YYM: Very much so. Virtually all of the German Idealists had a significant Spinozist period in the development of their thought, and with the exception of Maimon, they all claimed that they suggest the only viable alternative to Spinoza.

The project of synthesizing Spinoza and Kant is not trivial at all, since in many ways Kant was the least sympathetic to Spinoza among the German Idealists (at least till his very late period). On the issue of the importance of the human standpoint and the value of humanity, they offer very different, if not opposed, visions. Were Spinoza to read the opening page of Kant's *Anthropology*, he would most likely refer to it as human narcissism, a self-gratifying fairytale.

3:AM: Does Spinoza's rationalism commit him to a sort of idealism that is relevant to understanding the German variety?

YYM: I do not think that Spinoza's rationalism, i.e., his commitment to universal intelligibility, leads him to embrace reductive idealism, since such a reduction would break the barrier between the attributes. Since the barrier is located at the very inner edifice of the system, the entire structure will collapse almost immediately if you break the barrier. In the past few years, my beloved teacher, Michael Della Rocca, has been tinkering with the idea of reading Spinoza as ultimately reducing everything to reason. But Michael knows well that very little will be left of Spinoza's system if the barrier between the attributes collapses. From the most recent exchanges we have had, I have the sense that he might be willing to bite even this bullet (and I admire this consistency), but, truly, I do

not think Spinoza is committed to the view that ultimately everything must be reduced to conceivability. As to the German Idealists, I think the issue of the reduction to concepts hangs on how one understands the nature of “the given.” For Kant, intuitions are definitely not reducible to concepts. The early Maimon thinks they are. So you won’t have a uniform answer in this regard among the German Idealists. All that said, I think the kind of rationalism Della Rocca (rightly, I believe) ascribes to Spinoza is shared by figures such as Jacobi and Maimon. (Jacobi, for one, thinks he can jump from the rationalist train by a certain salto mortale, or a Pascalian leap of faith. I am not sure I would recommend this. Look at the “philosophy” of Leo Strauss, which is essentially a popular version of Jacobi, and judge for yourself.)

3:AM: What is the relationship between Herder and Spinoza and how significant is this for the development of the German Idealist tradition?

YYM: Herder’s main Spinoza piece, *God, Some Conversations* (1787) was a critical response to the “Pantheism Controversy” between Jacobi and Mendelssohn that took place just two years earlier. In this booklet Herder criticizes sharply both parties of the debate, claiming that both turned Spinoza into a caricature (Jacobi’s reading of Spinoza has some genuine insights to my mind, but it also contains very significant distortions). The crude readings of Spinoza by Lessing, Mendelssohn, and, to a lesser extent, Jacobi were the source of quite a few blunders in the German reception of Spinoza in the next two centuries. (To give a quick example: when Gershom Scholem attempted to disassociate the Kabbalah from Spinozistic pantheism, his main maneuver was to claim that for Spinoza there is a symmetric relation between God and the world of finite things, invoking Lessing’s and Mendelssohn’s slogan: “All is One and One is All.” Unlike Spinoza, claimed Scholem, the Kabbalist assumed that the world of finite things depends on God, but not the other way around. This is a vulgar reading of Spinoza, since, for Spinoza, finite things are modes, and modes – whether finite or infinite – depend on the substance asymmetrically. Thus, Spinoza, just like the Kabbalists, affirmed the asymmetric dependence of the totality of finite things on God.

Recently, Michael Forster has argued that Herder’s writing on Spinoza had a decisive, yet not properly acknowledged, role in the turn to Spinoza in German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. I think he is right. One important feature of Herder’s writing on Spinoza is his serious and extensive engagement with Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise*. The common picture we currently have is that German philosophers of this period concentrated solely on Spinoza’s *Ethics* and had virtually no interest in the *Theological Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*. I suspect this view is imprecise, but this remains to be shown.

3:AM: What is the principle *omnis determinatio est negatio*, and why were the German Idealists so concerned with it? Was Hegel right in attributing it to Spinoza?

YYM: The phrase “*determinatio negatio est*” (determination is negation) appears in one of Spinoza’s letters in the context of his discussion of geometrical shapes (the shape of the triangle is said to be a negation of the space (or matter) outside it). Both Jacobi and Hegel considered this claim as a much more general metaphysical (or logical) principle, and they were right to do so, since Spinoza uses the same reasoning in the *Ethics* as well (e.g., in the first scholium to the eighth proposition of part one). Still, I think Hegel and Spinoza had pretty different understandings of this formula. In fact, there seems to be at least three different readings of this formula at stake: (1) Spinoza’s own understanding, (2) the reading Hegel ascribes to Spinoza, and (3) Hegel’s own interpretation of the formula. The clarifications of these three different readings of the formula – and generally, the clarification of the

misreadings of Spinoza by the German Idealists – is crucial, if we wish to bring them into genuine philosophical dialogue. Without such a clarification, they will be just talking past each other.

The “every determination is negation” formula was extremely important for Hegel, as he considered it an important precedent of his own dialectic. I have mentioned earlier that Hegel viewed Spinoza’s monism as a modern reemergence of Eleatic philosophy. Hegel – just like Della Rocca – was truly enchanted by the Sirens of Elea. He thought that philosophy must begin with Spinozist or Eleatic monism, but that it also must proceed beyond this standpoint, and he considered dialectic – the formation and implosion of contradictions – as the primary vehicle for the unfolding of philosophy. Thus, for Hegel, Spinozism was not only the proper point of departure for philosophy, but it also contained the tool – i.e. dialectic – which allowed philosophy to develop and move ahead. For Hegel, Spinoza was simply not aware of the importance of his own discovery, and failed to actualize the potential of the “determination is negation” doctrine.



3:AM: You argue that although Hegel enthusiastically adopted the principle, it is actually much more Kantian than Hegelian in the way Spinoza uses it, don't you?

YYM: Yes, and I did not expect this conclusion when I first started studying the topic. Hegel’s own construal of the “determination is negation” formula was as a slogan of universal dialectic which asserts that every concept or thing is determined only through its contrast with other concepts or

things. In this manner, the infinite would depend on its opposite, the finite, just as much as the finite depends on the infinite. Spinoza would clearly reject this view since he thinks that finite things depend on God asymmetrically.

A second reading of the formula (the reading Hegel ascribes to Spinoza), asserts that God, or the infinite, is absolutely indeterminate, and it is only by virtue of negating God's absolute indeterminateness that finite, determinate, things are formed. This reading, unlike the first, avoids making God dependent upon finite things, and there are a few passages in Spinoza's work which may seem to support it. Yet, as I pointed out earlier, the reading of Spinoza as an Eleatic philosopher is inconsistent with numerous principal claims of Spinoza (such as the definition of God as absolutely infinite). Furthermore, in one of his letters, Spinoza responds to a colleague who understands his concept of God as a variant of negative theology. In his response, Spinoza clarifies that the precise opposite is the case: he understands God to be maximally determinate, allowing no attribute to be excluded.

Eventually, the resulting picture you get is of God as a maximally determinate being, and of everything else as partial negations, or limitations, of this infinitely determinate being. This picture is very close to Kant's *ens realissimum* in the "Ideal of Pure Reason" chapter of the *First Critique*, and Kant is clearly well aware of the Spinozistic pedigree of this notion; when he turns to illustrate the claim that all things are mere limitations of the *ens realissimum*, he uses the very same geometrical example employed by Spinoza in Letter 50, where we first encountered the "determinatio negatio est" formula.

3:AM: What do you think Spinoza would have made of the [German Idealists](#)? Would he have recognized their interest in his work and the way they developed his thinking as being in the right spirit? Would he have been happy to have joined them?

YYM: That's a wonderful question, but it involves many issues, and so I would have to pick a few which are most salient and easiest to explain. I would imagine that Spinoza's response to the [German Idealists](#) would begin with a list of clarifications, pointing out their various misunderstandings of his claims. Having made these clarifications, it would become clear that some of their disagreement are more apparent than real. But there would be still quite a few serious issues to debate at the family table. One such issue is the common critique among the [German Idealists](#) that the geometrical method of writing (i.e., Spinoza's axiomatization of the *Ethics*) is inadequate for philosophy since philosophy cannot begin with any given definitions of axioms. In response, Spinoza could argue that the question of how philosophy should begin is deep and important, but that it is orthogonal to the issue of the proper method of philosophical writing. Axiomatization makes the structure of one's arguments transparent, and transparency is always an epistemological virtue. The axiomatic method makes one easily aware of the problem of where philosophy should begin, but it is neither the cause of the problem, nor does it even contribute to its formation.

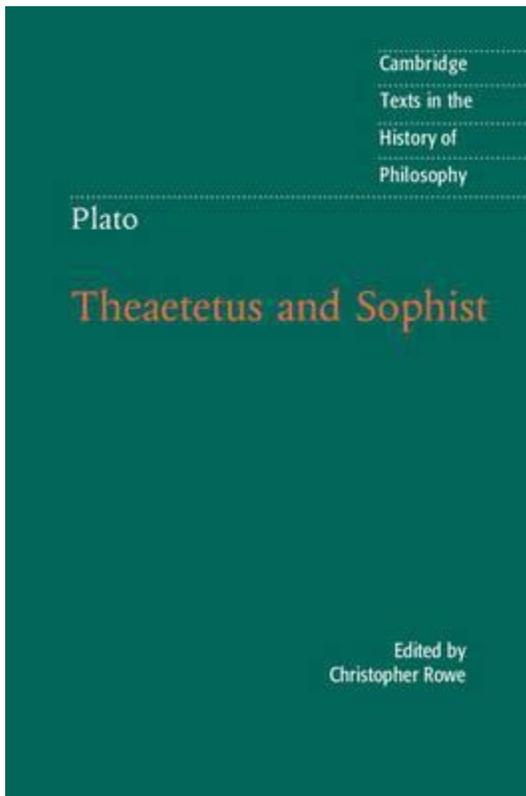
I suspect that Spinoza is not likely to be sympathetic to Hegelian dialectic, as he would not be willing to relax the law of non-contradiction (and because Hegelian self-negation conflicts with his *conatus* principle). The German Idealists' attempts to derive the basic categories of thought would most likely intrigue Spinoza. He might first try to interpret the categories along lines that are familiar to him – perhaps his three kinds of cognition, or his claim that our perceptions of the external world are just as much the result of our sense organs and nervous system as they are the result of external bodies – but it would not take him long to realize that the Kantian epistemological project is quite far from his.

Generally, I suspect that the conversation between Spinoza and Kant about the importance and value of humanity wouldn't end amicably. For Spinoza, the Kantian homo noumenon and the postulate of immortality would seem as childish fairytales. Spinoza would also fail to understand why the cognitive limitations of human beings are supposed to tell us what is the nature of reality any more than the cognitive limitations of the cow. I imagine [Kant](#) would throw up his hands in despair, noting that he is not speaking about human empirical psychology, but rather of the conditions for any possible experience. Where this conversation would end up I am not sure, but it would require genuine patience and modesty on both sides in order to turn it into a fruitful dialogue.

Finally, assuming Spinoza would be ready to admit his errors (which he rarely does), he would have to go back to the drawing board, think hard, and try to revise the few shaky arguments in the *Ethics* which the German Idealists rightly pointed out (e.g., the demonstrations of the first two propositions of part two).

3:AM: And finally, are there five books that you can recommend to us that would take us further into your philosophical world?

YYM: With pleasure, though, if I may, I'd rather recommend more-or-less five bodies of work.



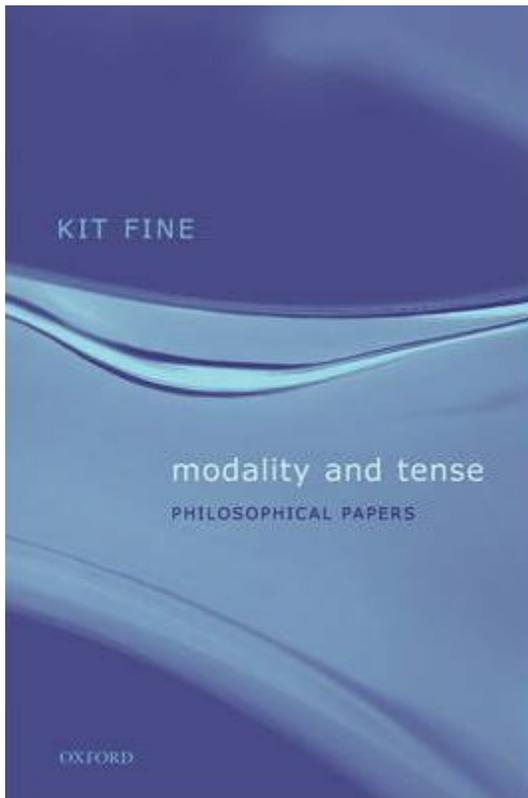
I have long admired and always enjoyed rereading Plato's [Sophist](#)

Plato

Parmenides

Translated by
Mary Louise Gill
and
Paul Ryan
Introduction by
Mary Louise Gill

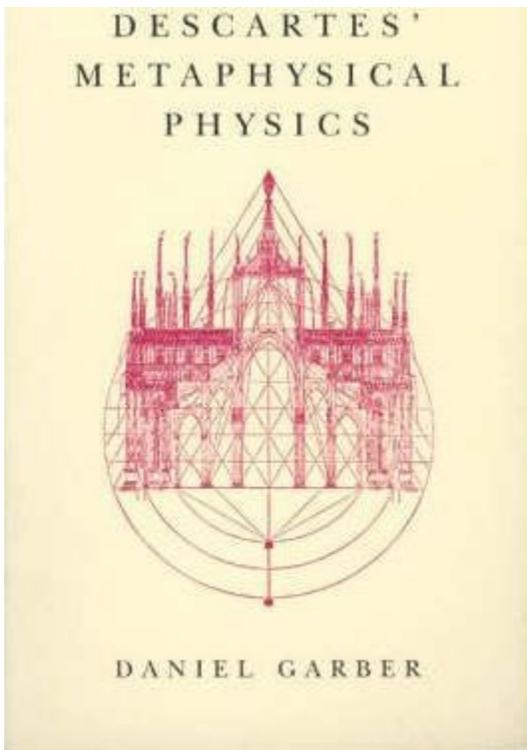
and the [*Parmenides*](#).



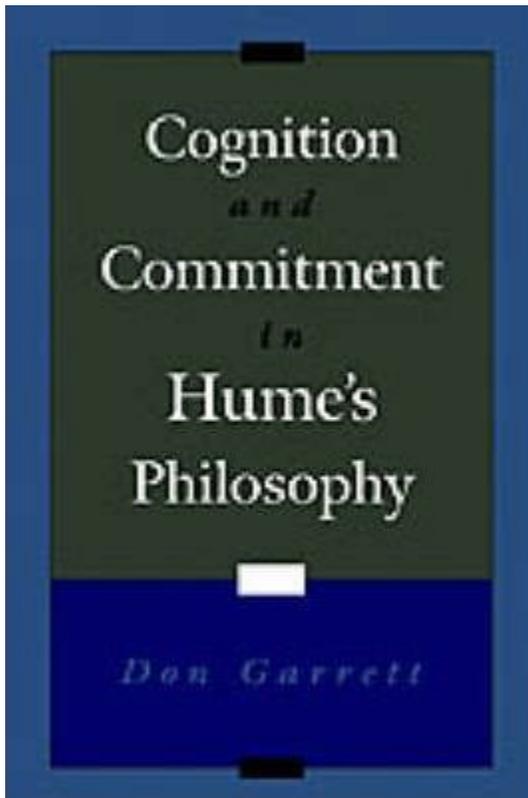
In contemporary philosophy, I'm a fan of [Kit Fine's](#) work in [metaphysics](#) (especially his rehabilitation and reintroduction of metaphysical concepts from the history of philosophy).



Closer to home, the two Spinoza books I always find highly rewarding are [Martial Gueroult](#)'s two-volume work (Spinoza, Aubier-Montaigne, 1968/1974), and Della Rocca's 2008 [Spinoza](#) (Routledge).



Two other groundbreaking works in early modern philosophy I would warmly recommend are [Dan Garber's *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics*](#) (Chicago, 1992),



and [Don Garrett's *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*](#) (Oxford, 2002).



An impressive political thinker who is much underappreciated in the Anglo-American world is Rosa Luxemburg, a deeply democratic and gender-conscious Marxist. I would recommend as an entry point

her short piece of 1918 on the Russian Revolution (translated in [Reform or Revolution and Other Writings](#). Dover: 2006), though readers allergic to Marxist terminology may prefer her correspondence.

Finally, I would heartily recommend the ingenious and original attack on Aristotelean metaphysics by the late fourteenth-century Jewish philosopher, Hisdai Crescas, in his [Light of the Lord](#), or Or ha-Shem. It is long due for this work to appear in complete English translation.



ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

[Richard Marshall](#) is still biding his time.

Buy his new book [here](#) or [his first book here](#) to keep him biding!

[End Times Series: the first 302](#)

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Mary's Room and stuff

I think laptops and quarks are both real. My difference with Carnap and Huw Price is that I am...

absolute generality

I thought it was absolutely obvious that one could make claims about absolutely everything, and started working on the...

Multiverses and sleeping beauty

The Everettian multiverse is one of the most beautiful ideas in the history of science. If it's wrong, at...

Leibniz, Berkeley, Kant, Frege; bees, toasters and Julius Caesar

Within ten years he had produced a strikingly original, if slightly crazy, physics of his own. He then traveled...

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