

First Meeting of the Spinoza Society of Canada: Current Debates and Ongoing Research

CPA Congress 2016

University of Calgary

Scurfield Hall, Room 268

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Recent scholarly interest in Spinoza has been increasing in both volume and notoriety. As a result of this increased interest, we have founded the Canadian Spinoza Society to promote and connect Canadian English and French-language research and scholars with each other and the rest of the world. In this spirit, the symposium will present papers in both languages, from both Canadian and American scholars. These papers will cover topics in Spinoza's ethics, method, metaphysics, physics, politics, and psychology, as well the interrelations between these domains, which are a key characteristic of Spinoza's unique contribution to the history of philosophy, and which help highlight his continuing value today.

Participants and affiliations:

Ericka Tucker (Marquette University)

Karolina Hübner (University of Toronto)

Torin Doppelt (Queen's University)

Alexandre Rouette (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières)

Sarah Kizuk (Marquette University)

Oberto Marrama (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières)

Schedule:

14:00 – 14:40: Ericka Tucker: Power and Freedom in Spinoza's Democratic Theory

14:40 – 15:20: Karolina Hübner: Spinoza on Expression

15:30 – 16:00: Torin Doppelt: Spinoza's Seemingly Absurd Love of God

16:00 – 16:30: Alexandre Rouette: Le concept de « corpora simplicissima » dans la physique spinoziste

16:30 – 17:00: Sarah Kizuk: Bodies in Spinoza's Metaphysical Theory of Individuation: Fixed Movement and the Drive to Persevere in Being

17:00 – 17:30: Oberto Marrama: Common notions and common properties in Spinoza's theory of knowledge

Abstracts:

Ericka Tucker: Power and Freedom in Spinoza's Democratic Theory

One of Spinoza's more puzzling claims is that a large group of people is less likely to agree to a single piece of nonsense, and thus that the more people involved in decision making, the more reasonable, powerful and, ultimately, free those decisions will be. This is often taken, itself, to show the absurdity of Spinoza's political writings, and indeed his naiveté about human nature and politics. We need only picture the crowds at Nuremberg to think that large groups often agree to absurdities, often with terrifying consequences. I argue that when we account for metaphysical architecture of Spinoza's position, his view is neither incomprehensible nor absurd. Overcoming our failure to understand Spinoza's ontological and epistemological theories brings into sharp focus Spinoza's claim democracy is most absolute form of governance, can yield the most reasonable agreements, and crucially, is the freest. The contemporary relevance of this position is hard to overstate. I show first that Spinoza conceives freedom as power, and I show the meanings of power in Spinoza's physics and metaphysics. Second, I re-articulate freedom and power in socio-political terms. Spinoza argues that successful states find ways of making individual humans recognize that they are part of larger wholes. Made up of human parts, states are able to allow human individuals to join their 'power' together, to add to the power of the whole. Collective power allows humans more power than they would otherwise have to achieve their individual and collective goals. The more power such a state has, the freer its citizens are. Achieving this 'collective power', however, requires maximizing individual human power and developing institutions to maximize collective knowledge. Spinoza argues that democracy achieves these aims most successfully, and thus, in his view, is the most 'absolute' form of state and the most free. Freedom thus emerges as social and cooperative experience.

Karolina Hübner: Spinoza on Expression

Spinoza's concept of "expression" receives little attention from scholars, but its centrality is clear from the fact that Spinoza uses it to characterize all of the most fundamental relations in his ontology. The paper demonstrates the systematic nature of "expression" as a notion, makes a case for its significance for Spinoza's mature ontology generally, but especially for his understanding of (i) intelligibility; (ii) the substance-mode relation as a relation of immanence, and (iii) identity. It also shows that (iv) expression is irreducible to more familiar Spinozistic relations (causation, conception, inherence); that (v) it is a relation of property-inheritance and of (vi) dependence for intelligibility, such that what a thing expresses is its fundamental condition of intelligibility. That is, "expression" functions as Spinoza's answer to the question, What must being itself be like for a thinking thing to think being? The paper thus rejects readings that champion conceptual relations as ontologically and explanatorily most fundamental for Spinoza.

Torin Doppelt: Spinoza's Seemingly Absurd Love of God

It is well known that Spinoza holds a high place in his system for what he calls 'love of God' [*amor dei*]. This notion has puzzled many readers of the Ethics, from Novalis (who famously describes Spinoza as "God-intoxicated") to current scholars, because it seems to fly in the face of almost everything else Spinoza says (e.g., the many naturalistic, monistic arguments, which pervade so much of Spinoza's thought, especially the *Appendix* of *Ethics* I). In a somewhat infamous remark, Jonathan Bennett opines that last part of the Ethics, in which the intellectual love of God plays a major role, is "rubbish which causes others to write rubbish." Yet, another commentator (Dutton) asserts that "[The *Ethics*'] ultimate

aim is to aid us in the attainment of happiness, which is to be found in the intellectual love of God.” Contrary to Bennett’s pessimistic reading, Steven Nadler, has recently argued that the intellectual love of God constitutes “our understanding of the universe, our virtue, our happiness, our well-being and our ‘salvation’. It is also our freedom and autonomy...” From the preceding remarks, it is abundantly clear that Spinoza’s notion of ‘love of God’ must be of utmost importance to his ethical project. It should be surprising, then, if this notion turns out to be absurd. Nevertheless, I will argue that in a strict sense, ‘love of God’ is, *prima facie*, absurd. I do this in part by elucidating five distinct uses of the term ‘love’ in the *Ethics*. Having established this, I argue for a way out of the apparent absurdity, which will generate a clearer conception of the multifaceted, but ultimately unified, role of love in Spinoza’s system.

Alexandre Rouette: Le concept de « corpora simplicissima » dans la physique spinoziste

Le concept de « corpora simplicissima », ces corps qui ne « se distinguent les uns des autres [qu’]en raison du mouvement et du repos » (E2, Lemme 3, Démonstration), est un des concepts ayant fait couler le plus d’encre dans la littérature secondaire consacrée à l’étude des concepts de la physique spinoziste. Parce que le philosophe donne une définition plus que succincte de ce que sont exactement ces *corpora simplicissima*, les commentateurs ne s’entendent pas du tout sur le sens que l’on doit accorder à ce concept. Nous commencerons par exposer brièvement les différentes positions défendues par plusieurs commentateurs d’envergure (Pierre Macherey, Gilles Deleuze, Martial Gueroult, Alexandre Matheron et plus récemment Sophie Laveran se sont tous penchés sur la question) et montrerons en quoi ces positions sont erronées ou du moins insuffisantes. Nous examinerons ensuite les interprétations de ces commentateurs par des considérations sortant du strict cadre de la physique, mais pourtant essentielles : le concept d’infini. Nous sommes d’avis qu’une compréhension réellement adéquate du concept d’infini chez Spinoza nous permettra de comprendre de façon véritablement adéquate le concept de *corpora simplicissima* et tout ce qu’il implique.

Sarah Kizuk: Bodies in Spinoza’s Metaphysical Theory of Individuation: Fixed Movement and the Drive to Persevere in Being

This work looks at the individuation of bodies in Spinoza’s metaphysics. The following three notions are central to Spinoza’s account: (i) motion and rest; (ii) fixed patterns; (iii) the conatus, specifically as it relates to the ratio of an individual. To illuminate this account, I offer an analysis of each of these obscure notions. I argue that motion and rest ought to be understood as characteristics of the attribute of extension rather than as qualities of modes. Additionally, I argue that fixed ratios should be understood as enduring patterns of motion an individual adheres to. This adherence is made possible by a constant communication of motion between parts. In this sense, I claim, the conatus and the ratio are two expressions of the same driving force to remain in being, or a self-maintaining activity.

Oberto Marrama: Common notions and common properties in Spinoza’s theory of knowledge

The concept of “common notion” is a cornerstone of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, since common notions, as Spinoza says, are the foundations of our reasoning (*Ethics* II, p40s1). The demonstration that Spinoza provides, in order to explain the existence of common notions in the human mind, involves the existence of common properties in the bodies (*Ethics* II, p38-39). However, on the metaphysical domain, Spinoza provides no hint as to how to interpret the relation subsisting between these common properties of bodies and the nature of the existing objects to which they refer, apart from stating that such properties do not constitute the essence of any singular thing (*Ethics* II, p37). Moreover, on the epistemological

domain, an account capable of explaining how common properties of bodies may become peculiar objects of our actual thoughts, and how they relate with the rest of our mental contents, seems to be missing. “The enormously obscure p38d has defeated me,” Bennett wrote (1984, p. 183). In my presentation, I will first explore a possible way to account for common properties of things in Spinoza’s metaphysical system. Then I will investigate the origin of common notions in the human mind and its relationship with empirical experience of the world and the activity of the body. In particular, I will verify the consistency of two claims recently put forward by Eugene Marshall, that is: 1) that common notions correspond to infinite modes; 2) that common notions are innate in the human mind.