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Interpreting Spinoza: The Real is the Rational

MICHAEL DELLA ROCCA*

IN HIS CHARACTERISTICALLY GENEROUS and searching discussion of my book, *Spinoza*, Daniel Garber rightly points out that I structure my interpretation of Spinoza's system around the principle of sufficient reason (the PSR). This is the principle that, as I and others sometimes put it, each fact has an explanation and is thus not brute, or the principle that each thing has an explanation. The 'or' will soon be important. Indeed, it might seem that I am too focused on the PSR—certainly I seem that way to Garber¹—for I seek to use the PSR to unlock any number of problems that interpreters of Spinoza have faced over the last three centuries. Garber does a great job of conveying the range of uses to which I put the PSR in an attempt to bring Spinoza's system under control, so I will not go into the details except to say that the interpretation I offer covers not only Spinoza's metaphysics, but also his epistemology, philosophy of mind, psychology, moral and political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and, in a way, his account of human salvation. I also will not talk about the crucial two-fold use to which Spinoza puts the PSR and which leads to some of the idealist strands of my reading. Garber omits any discussion of the two-fold use, and so I will leave it out here too. The general point is that, for me, the PSR opens up breathtaking interpretive vistas that reveal Spinoza's system to be coherent, defensible, and groundbreaking in unexpected ways. It is an exciting story, one that I was and am happy to tell.

Garber's aim in his essay is to challenge my reading of Spinoza both on first-order interpretive grounds and on second-order methodological grounds. With regard to the first-order worries, Garber's main points are that there is no good evidence that Spinoza is committed to the PSR in the strong—"no brute facts"—form in which I present it and that Spinoza does in fact allow at least one major brute fact at the heart of his system. With regard to the second-order worries, Garber expresses a preference for what he sees as a "direct reading" of Spinoza over what he sees as my rational reconstructions of Spinoza. His Spinoza is the

¹Perhaps also to my family, but that is another matter.

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“real historical” Spinoza, whereas mine is an ideal type, a superhero but not the actual philosopher.

I would like to push back a bit against Garber on both the first- and second-order grounds. With regard to the first-order worries, I reaffirm my textually well-grounded reasons for seeing Spinoza as espousing a strong form of the PSR, and I also offer reasons for denying that there is the big brute fact that Garber finds in Spinoza’s system. With regard to Garber’s second-order, methodological worries, my main aim will be to try to characterize more accurately some genuine methodological differences between us and to stress that both Garber’s approach and my own are valuable ways of getting at the real Spinoza.

Before turning to the first-order skirmishes and second-order methodological love fest, I would like to offer two observations about the way in which Garber frames his discussion of my book and of my approach to Spinoza. First, at the outset, Garber compares the single-mindedness of my PSR-focused perspective on Spinoza both to the single-mindedness of Russell’s interpretation of Leibniz’s philosophy as motivated by his logic² and to the single-mindedness of Bernard Williams’s interpretation of the Descartes of the *Meditations* as a “pure enquirer.”³ I am, of course, only too happy for my work on Spinoza to be mentioned in the same paragraph (or book or library!) as these classic works by Russell and Williams; and, however inapt the comparison would be in other respects, I regard Garber as correct in pointing out similarities between the apparently unified interpretations at work in my book and in these others. I would also say that many other works on historical figures in philosophy display this kind of unified picture of their target philosophers. One hope I have is that by attempting here to articulate some of the virtues of my unified approach to Spinoza, I will also indirectly be offering a defense of a kind of approach to historical figures that one finds in Russell, Williams, and others.

My second observation concerns Garber’s opening characterization of the PSR-driven Spinoza as *first* appearing in my work. While I would certainly have liked to be able to take the credit for originating this reading of Spinoza, I cannot do so. Others before me have seen Spinoza in this rationalist light—in particular and in some ways most importantly Jacobi who, precisely because he saw Spinoza as devoted to the PSR and as employing the PSR to reach extreme metaphysical and moral conclusions, saw fit to reject Spinoza’s rationalism entirely and to adopt “the perfect conviction that certain things admit of no explication.”⁴ Jacobi’s reading, as is well known, helps to give rise to rationalist readings of Spinoza in German Idealism and, through that, British Idealism. On these kinds of readings and on my view, the key slogans that describe Spinoza’s philosophy are “to be is to be intelligible” and “the real is the rational.” One of my aims in the book and especially subsequent to the book is to rehabilitate important aspects of the reading of Spinoza that is to be found in some of his idealist interpreters.⁵

²See Russell, *Leibniz*.

³See Williams, *Descartes*.

⁴Jacobi, *Doctrine of Spinoza*, 193. See the discussion in Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 283–87.

⁵See my paper, “Rationalism, Idealism, Monism.” For further discussion of such interpretations, see Newlands, “Hegel’s Idealist Reading” and “More Recent Idealist Readings,” and Renz, “Der neue

I. FIRST-ORDER SKIRMISHES

The heart of my reading of Spinoza as what Garber calls a super-rationalist turns on my attributing to Spinoza the PSR, which I express as the claim that there are no brute facts. It is worth noting that identifying the PSR as the heart of rationalism undermines right away the traditional rationalist/empiricist contrast. Even an empiricist—one who highlights in one way or another the role of the senses in knowledge—can in principle accept my kind of rationalist commitment to intelligibility and the denial of brute facts. Rationalism and empiricism are perfectly compatible on my view. Given this compatibility, I am wary of Garber's viewing my Spinoza—the superhero Spinoza—in connection with a rationalist/empiricist contrast about which I, no less than Garber, though for different reasons, am skeptical.

One of Garber's main first-order points against my interpretation is that, although Spinoza has a general commitment to the intelligibility of the world, the version of the PSR he espouses is not nearly as broad as the one that I attribute to him. In particular, Garber calls attention to certain apparent mismatches between the PSR I ascribe to Spinoza and the textual evidence I offer for such an attribution.

One of the key passages I invoke is Spinoza's claim in *E Ip1 d2*:

For each thing [*res*] there must be assigned a cause or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence.

After noting my reliance on *E Ip1 d2*, Garber goes on to make two important points. First, Spinoza's claim is explicitly about the explanation of *things* (*res*); as such, it seems to fall "quite short" of the claim that there are no brute *facts*, that each *fact* must have an explanation. Second, Garber points out that a number of the most central uses to which I put the PSR in my interpretation of Spinoza require that Spinoza reject not merely things without reason or explanation but, more generally, facts without reason or explanation. Thus, for Garber, the textual basis for my seeing Spinoza as endorsing the PSR—understood as a no-brute-facts thesis—is lacking. Garber says that *E Ip1 d2* could support the strong, fact-version of the PSR only if 'thing' "is stretched beyond plausibility."⁶

I am not convinced that Spinoza would allow a distinction between things and facts, as Garber's interpretation requires in drawing a distinction between the strong and weak versions of the PSR. I would have to see considerable textual evidence on this point. However, let us grant that Spinoza would draw a distinction between things and facts. Such a distinction *could* in principle enable Spinoza to accept the weak PSR (phrased in terms of things) and not the strong PSR (phrased in terms of facts). However, I think that Spinoza would accept a pretty direct path from the weak PSR to the strong PSR. Take a putative fact that would—contrary to the strong PSR—lack an explanation. Given Spinoza's substance monism (an interpretation that Garber does not challenge), according to which God or Nature

Spinozismus." For an account of some of the others who have recently come to take seriously a radically rationalist reading of Spinoza, see Mogens Laerke, "Spinoza et le Principe."

⁶See above, p. 512.

is the only substance, this allegedly inexplicable fact would have to be—as all facts are on the substance monist picture—expressed as the fact that substance is F for some property F. For each such fact, there would be at least one corresponding state (of the substance), and for each state of substance there is a corresponding fact. So wherever there is an unexplained fact there is an unexplained state of substance. A state of substance is plausibly seen, on Spinozistic terms, as a thing. After all, for Spinoza, modes in general are states of God, and Spinoza clearly regards modes as things (see e.g. *E* Ip28). Thus if we have an unexplained *fact* (and thus a violation of the strong PSR), we thereby also have an unexplained *thing* (in violation of the weak PSR). Or equivalently: for Spinoza, if there can be no violations of the weak, thing-oriented PSR, then there can be no violations of the strong, fact-oriented PSR.

Of course, to avoid this result, Garber may want to challenge the claim—at work in the above argument—that modes are states of substance. There has been a lot of scholarly controversy on this point,⁷ and I would be only too happy to get into that debate, but let me close this discussion of Garber's strong vs. weak PSR objection by noticing that that objection counsels us not to stretch, on Spinoza's behalf, 'thing' "beyond plausibility." This is an odd exhortation to make in the context of interpreting Spinoza, whose philosophy is all about stretching the meanings of ordinary terms beyond plausibility.⁸ Thus consider, for example, 'God,' 'mode,' and 'cause,' all of which are terms Spinoza stretches beyond plausibility. In this light, it is perhaps not so odd to suggest, as I do, that Spinoza may be open to stretching 'thing' beyond plausibility.

Another textual source for my attribution of the PSR to Spinoza is *E* Iax2:

What cannot be conceived through another must be conceived through itself.

Here is how I invoke *E* Iax2 in my book:

Here Spinoza says, in effect, that each thing must be conceived through something (either itself or another thing). For Spinoza, to conceive of a thing is to explain it. Thus in presupposing in Iax2 that everything can be conceived through something, Spinoza presupposes that everything is able to be explained, he builds the notion of intelligibility into the heart of his metaphysical system.⁹

In challenging my use of *E* Iax2, Garber again invokes the fact/thing distinction (the relevance of which I have already challenged). In addition, he takes issue with my gloss on what it is, for Spinoza, to conceive of a thing. Garber says,

This interpretation works, though, only if we agree with Della Rocca that "to conceive of a thing is to explain it." That seems rather implausible to me, as it has to other commentators.¹⁰

⁷See e.g. Edwin Curley, who denies that modes are states (Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics, Behind the Geometrical Method*, and elsewhere), and Yitzhak Melamed, who rejects Curley's interpretation; see Melamed, "Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance" and *Spinoza's Metaphysics*. I find Melamed's arguments on this point in general compelling.

⁸On Spinoza's principled reasons for twisting the meanings of terms, see the excellent account in Laerke, "Spinoza's Language."

⁹Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 4–5.

¹⁰See above, p. 512.

Garber does not say why he thinks this interpretation is implausible, nor does he mention, or thus challenge, the textual evidence I offer in a note contained in the passage that Garber and I quote from pages 4–5 of my book. There I point out that Spinoza’s easy movement between claims about how substance is conceived and how substance is explained (*EIp10s*, *EIp14d*, *EIIp5*) suggests that his notion of conception is a notion of explanation. (The relevant Latin terms are ‘*concipi*’ [*EIp10s*], ‘*explicari*’ [*EIp14d*], and ‘*explicatur*’ [*EIIp5*].)¹¹

I move now to a consideration of what Garber sees as

a brute fact, a fact for which there seems to be no reason, at the center of Spinoza’s thought that makes it inconsistent with any strong reading of the PSR.¹²

Before I explore this alleged brute fact, a couple of points are worth making. First, the mere fact—if it is a fact—that there is a brute fact in Spinoza’s system does not undermine the PSR reading. At most it shows that Spinoza does not appreciate that there is this tension in his system between his overarching commitment to the rejection of brute facts and the alleged brute fact at the heart of his system. Further, even if there is such a tension, it is far from clear that Spinoza cannot welcome it, while still adhering to the PSR as fundamental.¹³

Second, besides the apparent brute fact that Garber discusses (and I will discuss) at length, Garber mentions, but does not explore, three other potential brute facts in Spinoza’s system: the apparent fact that we can, for Spinoza, know only two attributes, “the division between the substance and its attributes,” and “the distinction among three different kinds of knowledge.”¹⁴ It would be interesting to explore whether these are indeed brute facts and, if so, what implications that would have for our understanding of Spinoza’s system. In some of these cases I deny that there is a brute fact in Spinoza’s system. In other cases, I might be sympathetic to the claim that there is a brute fact in Spinoza’s system;¹⁵ but, again, I would not see the presence of such a brute fact as necessarily posing a threat to my interpretation.

Nonetheless, it is important to consider Garber’s centerpiece example of a brute fact in Spinoza, for I think it can be shown that the fact in question is not in fact, for Spinoza, brute. To invoke Garber’s example, let us say that the series of finite modes that actually exists contains Harry the Horse but not Eunice the Unicorn (there are, let us stipulate, no unicorns in the actual series). Garber grants that, for Spinoza, the existence of Harry is not a brute fact—the reason for his existence is the nature of God from which the existence of Harry follows. Likewise (in keeping with *EIp11d2*) there is a reason for the non-existence of Eunice, namely the fact that the series in which Eunice exists does not follow from, is not entailed by, God’s nature. So far: no brute facts, no facts beyond reasons. But—Garber claims—such a fact is not far away and it is a big one, namely the fact

¹¹Martin Lin gives further evidence in support of a strong PSR at work in Spinoza in “Principle of Sufficient Reason.”

¹²See above, p. 508.

¹³This is one theme in my paper, “Violations of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.”

¹⁴See above, p. 514.

¹⁵Regarding the second brute fact, see my worry in footnote 17.

not that Harry exists and Eunice does not, but rather the fact that God's nature entails that Harry exists and Eunice does not. This fact—the fact of entailment—is, Garber says, something for which there is no reason. God is self-caused and self-conceived, but there is, Garber says, no reason “why it is *this* nature . . . that is self-caused and self-conceived” rather than another nature—one that entails Eunice and not Harry—that is self-caused and self-conceived.¹⁶

Garber is surely right that the fact that God's nature entails that Harry exists and not Eunice is a central feature of Spinoza's metaphysics. But is Garber right in thinking that this fact is, for Spinoza, “beyond reasons”? Let us call the fact that the series including Harry exists “H.” Garber says that, for Spinoza, God's nature entails H, but there is no reason that God's nature entails H. If this is the case, then it would seem that there is nothing contradictory in its being the case that some other series including instead, say, Eunice, follows from God's nature. If there were such a contradiction, then the fact that there is such a contradiction would be the reason that E, the series including Eunice, is not entailed by God's nature. (In the same way, the fact that the existence of a square circle would involve a contradiction is the reason that a square circle does not exist, as Spinoza says in *E Ip11d2*.) But, for Garber, there is no reason that E is not entailed by God's nature, so there is nothing contradictory in saying that E is entailed by God's nature, that is, it is conceivable that E is entailed by God's nature. If there is no such contradiction, then H's following from God's nature and E's following from God's nature are each compatible with God's nature. That is, H's following from God's nature is conceivable and E's following is conceivable.

But if E and not H had been entailed by God's nature, God's nature would have had to have been different from what it actually is. God's nature is actually such that it entails H, but in the other conceivable situation, it would have been different, for it would have entailed E instead. Garber admits as much when he asks why it is *this* nature (the one that entails H) that is self-conceived rather than *that* nature (the one that entails E).

So we seem then to have two conceivable natures of God—the one that entails H and the one that entails E. But, for Spinoza, any conceivable nature of God or substance must exist (*E Ip7*, *E Ip11*). So if God has, as Garber in effect claims, two conceivable natures, each would have to exist, and so there would have to be two different substances or Gods. This, of course, is absurd for Spinoza, given what he sees as the necessity of substance monism which he argues for in the first half of Part I of the *Ethics*. This style of argument is precisely the way Spinoza reasons in *E Ip3d* where he rejects the possibility of there being a series of things different from the actual series that follows from God's nature. He says there that if there were two such different possible series, then there would have to be two natures of God, both of which would have to exist. Thus, for Spinoza, it cannot be the case that the fact that God's nature entails H is brute, because otherwise there would have to be more than one God.

¹⁶See above, p. 516.

What, then, is the reason that God's nature entails H? I think that the answer has to be that God's nature explains not only H, but also the fact that H follows from that nature. God's nature's explaining facts about God's own nature is simply an aspect of the fact that, as Spinoza stresses and as Garber, of course, recognizes, God is self-caused and self-conceived, a being whose existence follows from its very nature. What I am suggesting is that, in explaining itself, God explains why certain things and not others follow from God's nature. To think that God's self-explanatory nature does not explain such facts of following would be to fall afoul of Spinoza's line of argument in *E Ip33d*.¹⁷

Garber attempts to bolster his claim that, for Spinoza, God's nature's entailing H is a brute fact by appealing to what Garber aptly calls the "divine good pleasure" account in *E Ip33s2*. There Spinoza describes a view according to which, as Garber puts it,

things happen in the world only because of God's good pleasure: he does things, but there is no reason why he does them beside the fact that he just wants to.¹⁸

Spinoza does not hold this position himself, but he expresses, as Garber notes, surprising sympathy for it and says that it "is nearer the truth than that of those who maintain that God does all things for the sake of the good" (*E Ip33s2*). Garber characterizes in the following terms what is right in Spinoza's eyes about the divine good pleasure view:

Just as the "good pleasure" theorist does not think that God acts for a reason, Spinoza holds that there is no reason why God's nature entails this series or that.¹⁹

However, I believe that Garber may mischaracterize what Spinoza likes about the divine good pleasure account. The context of *E Ip33s2* is one in which Spinoza is considering the view that God acts for the sake of the good. Such a view is to be opposed, for Spinoza, because it seems "to place something outside God" that serves as a guide for God's action. But, of course, on Spinoza's strict monism, there is nothing outside God to play this role. Spinoza says that the divine good pleasure view, which does not presuppose that there is a model outside of God, is superior in this respect to the view that God acts for the sake of the good, which does, Spinoza thinks, carry such a presupposition. The context thus makes clear that it is because the divine good pleasure view is like Spinoza's own view in not subjecting God to things external to God that Spinoza expresses some sympathy for the divine good pleasure view. Nothing in this passage indicates that what Spinoza likes about this view is that it, like his own view according to Garber, involves a kind of brute fact when it comes to the divine nature or divine activity.

¹⁷Speaking for myself, I am not sure that Spinoza's argument here is good. There may be concerns about whether such internal relations that Spinoza says a substance bears to itself are, in the end, intelligible. See my paper, "Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*." But I think that it is right to see Spinoza as rejecting, for the above reasons, brute entailment relations.

¹⁸See above, p. 518.

¹⁹See above, p. 518.

2. SECOND-ORDER METHODOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

I would like to continue engaging in these and other first-order interpretive disputes, and I look forward to returning to these matters at some point, but it is time now to move to the underlying methodological issues which, as Garber and I both suspect, may be the most interesting of all.

For years, people have told me that there is a significant methodological difference between Garber's approach to the history of philosophy and mine. And I have tended to believe them. But I have found and I continue to find this difference difficult to pin down. I do think that there are important differences, and I will try to elicit them here, but I also think that the methodological similarities may be more significant than any real methodological contrasts.

I would like to begin with what Garber sees as a methodological difference that I think is not genuine. Garber claims that my appeal to the PSR and presumably my interpretation in general "is more a rational reconstruction, than a direct reading."²⁰ Why does Garber call my reading less than direct? Perhaps it is because, as Garber rightly notes, I rely on and attribute to Spinoza lines of thought that are not explicit in the text. Thus I engage in what Garber calls "rational reconstructions." It will not surprise anyone to hear that I do not regard rational reconstruction as inherently problematic. Where I disagree with Garber is in his characterization of my reading as less direct. There are two points here I would like to make.

First, my PSR-driven reading is firmly anchored in Spinoza's texts. Earlier in this response, I rehearsed some of the reasons for thinking so. Second, I think that *any* interpretation—perhaps short of reproducing the text verbatim, and perhaps not even then—is going to be a rational reconstruction in trying to highlight or make explicit what the text does not make explicit. We are all in the same business here: trying to make Spinoza's saying what he says intelligible, trying to understand his saying what he says. This does not mean, of course, that we are necessarily seeking to make what he says intelligible, but we are trying to make the fact that he says it intelligible. And to do this, we cannot merely receive the text passively or perceive it directly (if this is indeed possible). Rather, we must do something to it—for example, we must bring parts of the text to bear on one another in ways that may not be antecedently obvious, or we must bring other texts or non-textual factors to bear on whatever work it is with which we are engaging. To this extent, any interpretation, any attempt—either Garber's or mine or those of others—to make Spinoza's saying what he says intelligible is a rational reconstruction. So I think that the notions of directness or rational reconstruction do not reveal any genuine methodological difference between my approach and Garber's.

A different potential difference emerges at more than one point in Garber's essay. In challenging my PSR-driven reading of Spinoza, Garber stresses that "Spinoza just does not explicitly acknowledge any principles as fundamental" and that "Spinoza was not really a principle kind of guy."²¹ I have acknowledged already

²⁰See above, p. 515.

²¹See above, p. 513.

that I do see Spinoza as working with a fundamental principle that structures much of his thought. And there would certainly be a methodological difference between Garber and me in this connection if I approached Spinoza's thought with the preconceived idea that he was "a principle kind of guy" and then just dogmatically interpreted the texts in this light. But that is not what I do (any more than Garber dogmatically approaches the texts with the preconceived idea that Spinoza is not "a principle kind of guy"). Instead, I claim in my book and elsewhere that there is important textual support for this reading and that this reading goes a long way toward making Spinoza's saying what he says intelligible. Of course, Garber does not agree with this reading, but in this light the disagreement seems less of a methodological difference than a first-order dispute of a kind we have already encountered.

Perhaps, though, there is a genuine methodological difference in the neighborhood. For although I do not without textual evidence claim that Spinoza operates with an overarching principle, nonetheless I may be more open to the single-principle reading than Garber is. I am not sure how to measure lesser and greater degrees of willingness in such matters, but it seems fair to say that I bring to the text a greater willingness to see Spinoza as operating with a single, fundamental principle. Such a difference would certainly qualify as a methodological difference. But even if there is such a difference, I cannot see that it is in any way problematic that I have this greater willingness or that it is in and of itself distorting Spinoza's thought. As long as one is not dogmatic on such matters, a greater willingness to attribute overarching principles to Spinoza is, in principle, potentially illuminating, as is a lesser such willingness.

There is another, related potential difference invoked in Garber's paper. Garber claims that I fail to see that although Spinoza is concerned with intelligibility and explicability and sufficient reason, this concern does not provide a central narrative for the *Ethics* (if indeed the *Ethics* has a central narrative at all), much less does it provide a narrative for Spinoza's other works such as the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which may be motivated by a set of concerns quite different from those that actuate the *Ethics*. Garber says that, besides intelligibility and explanation, "the real historical Spinoza"

was interested in the nature of the world, in its necessity, in its lack of purposefulness, in the proper conception of God and God's relation to the world. The real Spinoza was driven to understand us as humans, our passions and how we can overcome them. He was driven to understand politics, how we can come together in stable civil states that would allow us to flourish as individuals. And perhaps above all, the real historical Spinoza was driven by a vision of the possibility of human happiness.²²

I must say—and I did say and I am happy to say—that I agree totally that Spinoza has all the aims and motivations Garber lists. Where I differ from Garber is in seeing the PSR as lying beneath or behind Spinoza's arguments and conclusions here: the PSR and the concern for intelligibility sheds light on and helps us to understand the motivations for each of the areas that Garber cites. Or so I argue in the book,

²²See above, p. 519.

with supporting textual evidence. Garber obviously disagrees about this role of intelligibility in Spinoza's system. Fair enough, but that is a first-order difference between us, not a methodological one. Again, I have addressed here some of the textual basis for my reading, and I would love to continue the first-order debate. There would be a methodological difference between us here only if I were to assume a priori that Spinoza must be approached in a way that accords him a single narrative in the *Ethics* and throughout his other works. But I do not come to Spinoza with such an a priori presupposition any more than Garber dogmatically assumes from the outset that Spinoza must be seen in a piecemeal way.

But, as before, perhaps a real methodological difference lurks in the vicinity. Just as I am perhaps more open to a single-principle reading, so too I am perhaps more open than is Garber to there being a general narrative that structures not only the *Ethics* but also other works of Spinoza. This greater openness may be a methodological difference, but again I cannot see that it is problematic as long as one keeps the dogmatism at bay.

Garber's paper suggests a final potential methodological difference. As Garber notes, I often draw connections between Spinoza's thought (or, indeed, the thought of any great philosopher I study) and contemporary philosophy. For Garber, my Spinoza "offers us a purity of vision that has the potential to transform even contemporary philosophy."²³ Near the end of his paper, Garber grants that "ideal types"—such as my Spinoza—"have a number of roles to play in contemporary argument," and he goes on to list some of what those roles might be.²⁴ Garber makes it clear that he prefers not to bring such contemporary connections into his work in the history of philosophy. By contrast, I am indeed interested in making such connections when I work on historical figures. (And I have also been known to produce other works that are apparently non-historical efforts.)²⁵

Garber is right that there is an important methodological difference between us in this regard. To understand this difference, it is crucial to see what the nature of my interest in drawing such connections is. Four points seem particularly relevant.

First of all, I do sometimes draw what, I hope, are illuminating comparisons between Spinoza (or others) and contemporary philosophy, but my interest is not just in Spinoza's connections to contemporary philosophy, but also in his connections to other periods in philosophy. In particular, of late (and after my book appeared), I am just as likely to consider connections between Spinoza's views and positions in ancient philosophy as I am to take up connections with contemporary philosophy.

Second, in my book, in thinking of Spinoza in connection with contemporary philosophy, I do not adopt the following trope which one sometimes finds in historical studies driven by contemporary philosophy: "Poor old Spinoza—if only he had had access to Frege's *Grundgesetze* or to Russell and Whitehead's *Principia*, or

²³See above, p. 508.

²⁴See above, p. 521.

²⁵First subversive footnote: Of course, the distinction between historical and non-historical work in philosophy is one that I sort of reject. But that is a theme for another occasion.

Carnap's *Aufbau*,²⁶ he could have avoided this or that embarrassing blunder." More and more, I am inclined to say in response to these kinds of pronouncements, "If only we could be free of the contemporary philosophical scene which is dominated by works such as Frege's and Russell's and Carnap's."²⁷ And more and more I am also inclined to say that Spinoza's philosophy can help us to learn or re-learn how to do philosophy in a more productive vein.

In other words—and this is my third point—often the connections I am interested in drawing between Spinoza and contemporary philosophy are *contrasts* that enable us to criticize contemporary philosophy. In particular, it is, I hope, by turning to some Spinozistic insights that we may be led away from the kind of metaphysical atomism that holds sway ironically in Russell, my fellow-travelling single-minded historian of philosophy, and others. We may also be led away from the realism—the absolute conception of reality—present again ironically in Williams, another of my fellow-traveling single-minded historians of philosophy, and less subtly present in so many areas of contemporary philosophy, particularly so-called analytical philosophy.

Finally, these connections and contrasts that I draw do not drive my interpretation of Spinoza. My interpretation—with all its apparent single-mindedness—is driven by Spinoza's texts and by the problems that I and others have encountered in interpreting those texts. The connections and contrasts between Spinoza and contemporary philosophy (as well as other periods of philosophy) may illuminate Spinoza's philosophy and my interpretation of it as well as display Spinoza's importance anew. But these connections and contrasts are not the motive force behind my interpretation.

My greater willingness to draw connections and contrasts to contemporary philosophy (and other periods of philosophy) forms a genuine methodological difference between Garber and me. But, as in the previous cases, I do not see this difference as at all problematic as long as one does not assume in advance that either approach is the only way to make Spinoza's texts intelligible.

We can now, I believe, detect a pattern in the three methodological differences I have identified. These differences, I have argued, consist in a greater or lesser tendency to see Spinoza (or any other historical figure) in terms of a single overarching principle that structures his thought, a greater or lesser tendency to see a unifying theme or themes across different works by the same author and across different stages of his or her career, and a greater or lesser tendency to draw connections (and contrasts) between Spinoza and other authors, earlier or later. This array of differences suggests that the most general and appropriate way to see the methodological difference between Garber and me is perhaps not in terms of Garber's contrast between oversimplifying superhero approaches and on-the-ground, get-your-hands-dirty, direct grapplings with the texts, but rather

²⁶Second subversive footnote: Notice how natural it is to think that contemporary philosophy includes such works, some of which are more than one hundred years old. That ought to tell you something about the state of contemporary philosophy.

²⁷See Della Rocca, "The Taming of Philosophy" and "Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*."

in terms of a contrast between more holistic and more atomistic approaches to historical figures in philosophy.

While I completely agree with Garber about the variety of motivations driving Spinoza's thought and while I see that Garber regards these various motivations as connected in important ways, I believe that I am less likely than Garber to emphasize the relative *independence* of these motivations, and thus their potential to pull Spinoza's thought (in a single work or across works) in different or even incompatible directions. In other words, for me Spinoza's various motivations may operate in a more unified direction than they do for Garber. This is one respect in which there is a greater holism at work in my approach. Another respect of greater holism is the greater emphasis in my interpretation on connections (and contrasts) with other philosophers earlier and later. In seeing Spinoza's views in light of (say) contemporary views and in seeing contemporary views in light of Spinoza's views, I am here emphasizing that these views are, in this respect, not independent. Thus I am more likely not only to unify various things Spinoza says but also to bring Spinoza's thought to bear on the thought of others philosophers from different periods. I do not deny that there may be other respects in which Garber's approach can be seen—as well as mine—as holistic, but I think that in the respects I have just featured, my approach is more holistic than Garber's. Perhaps, then, the methodological difference between us is fundamentally a difference between approaches that are relatively more holistic or relatively less holistic in these respects.

Is one of these approaches superior to the other? It is hard to see how. Both approaches operate with the same fundamental goal of making Spinoza's saying what he says intelligible, and there is, as far as I can see, no reason in advance to think that the more holistic approach is more or less likely to lead us to the real, historical Spinoza or Descartes or Parmenides or anyone else. Garber urges that the "real" Spinoza or the "real historical Spinoza" is grasped not through my more holistic method, but through his more atomistic method. But I cannot see why this should be the case. It seems to me that neither approach is precluded from making Spinoza's saying what he says intelligible, and it also seems to me that in our business—the business of the study of the history of philosophy—the real Spinoza is the Spinoza who is (by whatever means) made intelligible, the one whose actions can (by whatever means) be rationalized. More generally, the real historical philosopher is the one who can be made intelligible and whose actions can be rationalized. To revert to my idealist slogans, when it comes to interpreting historical figures in philosophy—as in Spinoza's philosophy itself, on my view—the real is the rational and to be is to be intelligible. The real Spinoza is the Spinoza whose actions and statements can be rationalized, and Spinoza *is* the Spinoza whose actions and statements can be made intelligible. And neither the more atomistic nor the more holistic approach has a monopoly on giving us this reality.

I believe that this relatively holistic method is a viable method for approaching historical philosophers generally and not just Spinoza. Perhaps, though, there is a respect in which the more holistic method is especially appropriate for understanding Spinoza in particular. To begin to see why, consider a deep and frequently-made observation about Spinoza's geometrical method in the *Ethics*.

Through Spinoza's geometrical method, certain conclusions are deduced—follow from—the definition of God, the fundamental being or substance. Spinoza's apparatus of definitions, propositions, and so forth thus mirrors the structure of reality itself, as Spinoza conceives it, a reality in which, as Garber notes and we have discussed, particular things follow from the nature of God. As Aaron Garrett puts it, Spinoza's procedure is "uniquely suited for his content, as it shows how and that propositions arise necessarily from a definition [the definition of God]."²⁸ When it comes to Spinoza's geometrical method, there is thus a pleasing convergence of form and content.

In the case of the interpretation of Spinoza, through the more holistic method I favor, there is another pleasing convergence of form and content: the holistic form of my approach to Spinoza's philosophy mirrors the unified monistic content of that philosophy itself, while the more atomistic approach to Spinoza may, in this respect, seem somehow, as Hume might put it, "foreign and extraneous" to the content of the philosophy itself.

It is a nice question how much the nature of one's approach to a philosophical text should or should not mirror the content of that text itself. But even without resolving that question, we can appreciate, I believe, reason to think that a more holistic approach is particularly apt for interpreting Spinoza.²⁹

²⁸Garrett, *Meaning*, 13.

²⁹Many thanks to Julia Borcharding, Steven Nadler, Carol Rovane, Barbara Sattler, Henry Southgate, and Ken Winkler for their insightful comments. I am especially grateful to Dan Garber for warmly proposing this exchange and for much illuminating engagement.