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Notes and Discussion

Superheroes in the History of Philosophy: Spinoza, Super- Rationalist

DANIEL GARBER*

EVERYONE LOVES SUPERHEROES. SUPERHEROES, of course, have incredible powers; they can leap tall buildings in a single bound, excel in combat, and have X-ray vision. But, in addition, superheroes have a kind of simplicity of motive and focus that makes them pure and comprehensible in the way in which the people we actually know rarely are. For Superman it is about Truth, Justice, and the American Way. For Batman it is all about fighting evil: defeating the Joker, the Riddler, and other nefarious characters. For Spiderman it is an outsized sense of mission: “With great power comes great responsibility.” Superheroes are superhuman individuals, who have a simple philosophy of life that motivates their every action. Of course, there are no such people in the world. But even so, there is a certain pleasure in imagining a world in which such titans walk the earth not only to protect us, but to function as models for our own lives. As Spinoza says “[W]e desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to” (*E* IVpref.).¹

We are not immune to such myth-making in the history of philosophy. There is, for example, Russell’s Leibniz, driven by his logic to form a metaphysics in its image.² More recently Bernard Williams has given us a picture of Descartes, who is obsessed with the idea of pure inquiry.³ And now there is Spinoza, Super-

¹As much as possible, references to Spinoza’s *Ethics* throughout the exchange will be given in the text. References to the *Ethics* begin with ‘E,’ followed by the part in Roman numerals, then ‘p’ for proposition, ‘pref’ for preface, ‘app’ for appendix, ‘ax’ for axiom, ‘d’ for demonstration, ‘def’ for definition, ‘s’ for scholium, etc. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the *Ethics* are taken from Curley’s edition, Spinoza, *Collected Works*, vol. 1. ‘TdIE’ refers to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. References are to section numbers, and translations taken from *Collected Works*. The authoritative original-language texts can be found in Spinoza, *Opera*. Occasional references to it are given as ‘G’ followed by volume and page number.

²Russell, *Leibniz*.

³Williams, *Descartes*.

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Rationalist, a new superhero in the Superphilosopher's League. This Spinoza first appears in the work of Michael Della Rocca, but he has been enthusiastically embraced by a variety of other commentators. What makes this vision of Spinoza so distinctive is his devotion to the Principle of Sufficient Reason—the PSR. On this conception, Spinoza's philosophy is understood as the systematic working out of the PSR and its consequences. For the fans of this Spinoza, his project is one of pure rationalism, pressing the idea of the intelligibility of the world as embodied in the PSR as far as it will go, farther than anyone before or since. The sworn enemy of the evil villain, Brute Facts of All Kinds, this Spinoza offers us a purity of vision that has the potential to transform even contemporary philosophy, making clear the consequences of living in a bright and luminous world of pure intelligibility.

In this essay I would like to explore this reading of Spinoza's thought. Though it is developed in a number of essays by Della Rocca and others, I will focus on what I take to be the canonical development of the position in Della Rocca's book, *Spinoza*.⁴ I will begin with a development of this conception of Spinoza, and a discussion of the grounds for attributing to Spinoza such a vision of philosophy and of the world. I shall argue that as attractive as such a view of Spinoza may be, it is not the historical Spinoza who lived and worked in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. I shall argue that the historical Spinoza's motivations are much less metaphysical and epistemological, and much more ethical and political than the super-rationalist depicted in Della Rocca's book. Furthermore, I shall argue that while Spinoza was certainly against superstition and supported a kind of scientific rationalism, there is 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. I will end with some methodological thoughts on the positive and negative roles that such readings of figures in the history of philosophy might play in the history of philosophy.

I. SPINOZA, SUPER-RATIONALIST

So who is this new superhero? A mild-mannered lens grinder, he quickly turns into an aggressive rationalist when he picks up his pen. Here are some of the ways that Michael Della Rocca, his devoted companion, characterizes him and his philosophy.

Della Rocca's Spinoza is, first of all, committed to the intelligibility of everything. For him this means that Spinoza is committed to the principle of sufficient reason. He writes,

Spinoza's philosophy is characterized by perhaps the boldest and most thoroughgoing commitment ever to appear in the history of philosophy to the intelligibility of

⁴For other developments of this reading in Della Rocca's work, see e.g. Della Rocca, "Rationalist Manifesto," "Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Scepticism," "Rationalism Run Amok," and "PSR." For some other authors who in one way or another follow out the general program of interpretation that Della Rocca advocates, see e.g. Newlands, "Harmony" and "Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism"; and Schneider, "Spinoza's PSR." Though he departs from Della Rocca's view of Spinoza, Martin Lin has also been influenced by this reading. See Lin, "Spinoza's Arguments," "Rationalism and Necessitarianism," and "Principle of Sufficient Reason." For a recent critical discussion of Della Rocca's *Spinoza*, see Melamed, "Sirens of Elea." Finally, for an amusing overview of the reading and its history, see Laerke, "Spinoza et le Principe," an introduction to this trend in Anglo-American history of philosophy intended for the French reader.

everything. For Spinoza, no why-question is off limits, each why-question—in principle—admits of a satisfactory answer. (1)⁵

Spinoza thus sees his philosophy as a stronghold against irrationalism in philosophy and as a challenge to other more complacent ways of doing philosophy. For these reasons—in other words, because of the purity of his philosophy—Spinoza enjoys a permanent and essential place in the canon of great philosophers and provides a refreshing and needed contrast to other, less ambitious philosophical approaches. The purity of Spinoza's commitment to explanation can best be articulated in terms of his commitments to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (hereafter, the "PSR") and to his naturalism. (4)

The PSR is . . . the embodiment of Spinoza's commitment to intelligibility. (4)⁶

Spinoza can be seen as a pure philosopher, always seeking explanation, always refusing to be satisfied with primitive, inexplicable notions. This purity is most evident in his commitment to the principle that each fact has an explanation, that for each thing that exists there is an explanation that suffices for one to see why that thing exists. Although Spinoza does not himself use the term, this principle is known as the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Leibniz is more often associated with this principle, but, as will become apparent throughout this book, Spinoza employs the PSR more systematically, perhaps, than has ever been done in the history of philosophy. (30)

Della Rocca's Spinoza was a "pure philosopher" in the sense that he was working out the consequences of his conception of intelligibility, rationalism, and the PSR, which were the primary motivations for his thought. In this way, Della Rocca's Spinoza is an arch-rationalist, someone whose main motivation was to work out a more thoroughgoing and consistent rationalism than anyone before. This is how Della Rocca characterizes Spinoza's relation to Descartes:

Descartes's conception [of substance] incorporates some guiding rationalist motivations but—Spinoza can be seen as implicitly saying—Descartes does not carry out these rationalist motivations consistently or far enough. Once you take the rationalist motivations in Descartes and follow through on them clear-headedly, you will arrive at something like Spinoza's more controversial account. (32)

It is important to understand what intelligibility means in this context. Della Rocca writes,

First, he [i.e. Spinoza] insists that each thing is intelligible, there are no facts impervious to explanation. Second, he holds that these explanations are—in principle—graspable by us. Our minds are, of course, limited in some ways; there are limits to how many things we can fully grasp. As Spinoza says, it would be impossible for human weakness to grasp the series of singular, changeable things, not only because there are innumerable many of them, but also because of the infinite circumstances in one and the same thing (TdIE §100). But this limitation is purely quantitative, not qualitative. While particular things may elude our grasp because of our finite ability to keep many things clearly in mind, no thing is by its nature inaccessible to the human mind. (2)

⁵As much as possible, I will give references to page numbers in Della Rocca, *Spinoza* in parentheses in the text.

⁶Della Rocca gives a definition of the PSR at the end of the book: "The principle that each truth has an explanation or that for each thing that exists there is an explanation of its existence" (376).

For Della Rocca's version of the PSR, intelligibility means intelligibility *for us*, either in actuality or in possibility.⁷

Closely connected with this standard of intelligibility and the PSR is a certain conception of naturalism: "Spinoza's naturalism, as I understand it, is the view that there are no illegitimate bifurcations in reality" (6). And this, in turn, is closely connected with the claim that there are no brute facts whatsoever in Spinoza's thought: "[W]e can see Spinoza's naturalism as driven by his rationalist denial of brute facts" (7). In his glossary Della Rocca defines a brute fact as "a fact that has no explanation" (315). For Della Rocca's Spinoza, there are no brute dichotomies in nature, such as between mind and body, or any domain in which the laws of nature do not apply. More generally, there are no brute facts at all: if such brute facts were to exist, they would violate the PSR.

To understand better how Della Rocca's Spinoza works, let us look at a couple of ways in which the PSR is applied. Here is his account of why Substance has more than one attribute. Commenting on the passage (*ΕΙΡΙΤΙΟΣ*) where Spinoza says that "although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e. one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two beings, or two different substances," Della Rocca writes,

Spinoza says here that the conceptual barrier shows that one attribute cannot prevent a substance from having another attribute. No other potential explanation of the one extended substance's lack of thought seems to be available. So if this substance did lack thought, that would be a brute fact and as such ruled out by the PSR. In this way, we can quickly see that every attribute not only must be instantiated but must also, on pain of violating the PSR, be instantiated by a single substance. (54)

And so, he concludes, the PSR is at the root of the claim that Substance has all the attributes. I will note here that this is *not* the argument that Spinoza gives, nor does Della Rocca claim it is. But it is a way of seeing why Spinoza might have held it. If Spinoza is committed to the PSR as Della Rocca understands it, then the PSR would commit Spinoza to this position, to which we know he is committed.

Here is a second case: the argument for why all mental states must be representational. Della Rocca writes,

I know of no other plausibly Spinozistic way to answer the question what is it in virtue of which A, a representational mental state, and B, a non-representational mental state, are both thinking. Thus the existence of such disparate mental states would involve a brute fact for Spinoza and so be unacceptable. (121)

Again, this is not an argument that Spinoza himself gives, but that Della Rocca gives in his name. He writes, "It must be acknowledged that the lines of reasoning I have just articulated are not to be found on the surface of Spinoza's texts; yet I think that they are not far below the surface" (122). This is the project, to mine below the surface in Spinoza's text, and find out what, in a way, is the real

⁷One might consider weakening this claim and allowing for a standard intelligibility that included the divine mind, so that one might say that everything was intelligible, though perhaps not to us finite minds. This would be a Super-Rationalism of another flavor, equally problematic as an interpretation of Spinoza, I suspect. But here I am only addressing Della Rocca's Spinoza.

motivation behind the words on the surface. And Della Rocca finds the motivation in a thoroughgoing rationalism, an adherence to complete intelligibility, the PSR, and a denial of all brute facts.⁸

Della Rocca's Spinoza appeals to the PSR in a wide variety of other arguments: to establish that finite things are not substances (42), that all causal connections are grounded in conceptual truths (44–45), that God exists (51–52), to establish substance monism (54–56), to establish that causation and inherence are the same (65–69), to establish necessitarianism (71, 77–78) and determinism (75), to deny anthropomorphism in God (78–87), to answer skepticism (132–33), and establish the existence of finite modes (262–63), among other uses. But it is not only in these metaphysical and epistemological contexts that Della Rocca's Spinoza appeals to the PSR. The PSR also plays crucial roles in the accounts Della Rocca gives of Spinoza's views on the rejection of ordinary evaluative terms (177, 183, 185), on morality in general (202–3), on political rights (208–10), the rejection of miracles (232), and the divinity of the Bible (250). Indeed, he argues, "Spinoza was—it is no exaggeration to say—excommunicated because of his rationalism and naturalism" (21). In *Spinoza*, Della Rocca tries to make good on the claim that everything in Spinoza is generated by the PSR by showing, in detail, how each element is, or can be, construed as deriving from the PSR or from the strong denial of any brute facts. In so doing, he presents Spinoza as the Super-Rationalist, pure of heart, devoted to the single-minded working out of the consequences of the complete intelligibility of nature.

2. WAS THE HISTORICAL SPINOZA A SUPER-RATIONALIST?

What are we to make of this reading of Spinoza? To what extent does it fit the historical Spinoza? For one, Spinoza never, to the best of my knowledge, characterized himself as a rationalist. (Neither, for that matter, did Descartes or Leibniz, generally considered Spinoza's rationalist partners in crime.) But that, of course, does not mean that he was not a rationalist in some sense. However, it does seem to me to put the burden of proof on the commentator to argue that it is an appropriate designation. In any case, it did not seem to be an actor's category within this group of seventeenth-century philosophers. Similarly, Spinoza never explicitly acknowledges the PSR, a term that does not explicitly come up until Leibniz, and he certainly never claims that it is a central principle in his thought. (For that matter, unlike Leibniz, who is constantly appealing to one principle or another, Spinoza just does not explicitly acknowledge any principles as fundamental.) But again, that does not mean that he did not acknowledge and use the PSR in some sense.

But what evidence is there that the historical Spinoza held something like the PSR or the brute-fact principle? Della Rocca cites two passages from the *Ethics* as evidence that Spinoza held the principle: *E Ip11d2*, and *E Iax2* (4). The passage in *E Ip11d2* is a premise in an alternative proof Spinoza gives of the proposition

⁸Della Rocca also talks about a "two-fold use of the PSR" that he thinks is "characteristic of [Spinoza's] rationalism" (8). But for the sake of simplicity here I am setting that aside.

that God exists: “God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exists.” The relevant proposition in the demonstration is the following:

For each thing [*res*] there must be assigned a cause or reason, both for its existence and for its nonexistence. (*E Ip11d2*)

This is certainly an important statement, and it is *like* the PSR. But it is weaker than the PSR as Della Rocca actually uses it. It says about each *thing* (*res*) that there must be a reason for why it exists or does not exist, a reason that must derive from its nature or from its cause. But it falls quite short of the “no brute fact” paraphrase of the PSR that Della Rocca uses in the arguments I gave earlier. For example, it cannot be used to establish that a substance cannot lack any of the attributes. As Della Rocca represents the argument, if substance lacked thought, “that would be a brute fact and as such ruled out by the PSR” (54). Maybe so, but not by the *E Ip11d2* version of the PSR, unless we read “thing” here in an extremely broad way, one that goes far beyond the question at issue in the context of the proof, where we are concerned with the existence of substance. Similarly it cannot be used to support the claim that there is no distinction between representational and non-representational mental states. As Della Rocca represents Spinoza’s reasoning, “[T]he existence of such disparate mental states would involve a brute fact for Spinoza and so be unacceptable” (121). Again, the weak version of the PSR in *E Ip11d2* is inapplicable unless ‘thing’ is stretched beyond plausibility.

Let us turn now to *E Iax2*, the other text that Della Rocca cites to support his claim that Spinoza subscribes to the PSR. *E Iax2* reads as follows:

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

This is Della Rocca’s explanation for why this is a statement of the PSR:

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. (4–5)

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.⁹ But even if we reject what Della Rocca reads into this axiom, it is difficult to know what to make of it. Since by *E Id3*, a substance is that which is conceived through itself, and by *E Id4*, a mode is that which is conceived through another, one might then interpret *E Iax2* as saying that everything is either substance or mode. But when Spinoza makes that claim in later texts, for example *E Ip4d* or *E Ip14c2*, it is to *E Iax1* that Spinoza appeals: “Whatever is, is either in itself or in another.” Indeed, after stating *E Iax2*, it never appears again in the *Ethics*. One might hold that *E Iax2* is redundant with respect to *E Iax1*, perhaps. Or one might hold, more strongly, that it advances the (stipulative) claim that everything must be conceivable in one way or another. Interpreted in

⁹See e.g. Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, ch. 3.

this way, there is certainly a kind of intelligibility at issue. But even so, like the principle drawn from *E Ip11d2*, it only applies to things or to ideas of things. It is difficult to see how it could be extended to the denial of brute facts, as Della Rocca's super-rationalist PSR is.¹⁰

I am very surprised that Della Rocca does not consider other supports for the claim that Spinoza considered the world to be a generally intelligible place. Here are some indications of his commitment to the intelligibility of the world:

Every finite mode must have a finite cause. (*E Ip28*)

Everything in nature follows exceptionless laws. (*E IIIpref*, *E IIIp2S*, *E IVp50s*, *E IVp56S*)

All of these suggest a very high standard of the intelligibility of nature. But even so, they all fall short of the standard of Della Rocca's version of the PSR. In particular, there is nothing in any of these particular statements that suggests anything as strong as "no brute facts." We will come back to this shortly.

I suspect that Della Rocca also thinks that his readings of particular doctrines in Spinoza as following from the PSR would be further support for the claim that Spinoza held the PSR in the strong form that he advocates. Even though he admits that Spinoza rarely cites anything like the PSR in *any* form in argument, the fact that he could be understood to do so would seem to support the claim that he at least implicitly held it, or something like it.

Here I am suspicious: one would have to go through the arguments one by one to assess the claim. In many (most?) cases, I would claim (1) the claim in question does not really follow from the Della Rocca-strength PSR; (2) even if it could be construed in that way, Spinoza himself offers a very different kind of argument for the claim in question. All of this provides little support for attributing the strong form PSR to Spinoza.

So, we reach a preliminary conclusion: there are no good grounds for attributing a universal PSR interpreted as strongly as Della Rocca does to the historical Spinoza, in the sense that all brute facts are to be excluded from nature. While Spinoza thought that nature was largely intelligible, the propositions expressing that intelligibility are in general much more restricted and much more modest than the full-blown PSR that Della Rocca attributes to Spinoza.

So yes, the world is (largely) intelligible to Spinoza; but no, that does not mean that he adopted any principle as strong as the Della Rocca PSR (or any other principle either). Why attribute any general principle to Spinoza over and above what he explicitly proposes himself? What is the point of looking for an underlying and deeper principle? (Unlike Leibniz, for example, Spinoza was not really a principle kind of guy.) So, if rationalism is equated with accepting this strong form of the PSR, then *the historical Spinoza was not a rationalist*, not a super-rationalist, not even a garden variety rationalist.

¹⁰Thanks to Yitzhak Melamed for helping me to clarify this point.

3. VIOLATIONS OF THE PSR?

So far we have been assuming that Spinoza's thought can at least be construed, or reconstructed, *as if* everything were in some sense intelligible in his world, even if we may not want to attribute to Spinoza anything as strong as Della Rocca's version of the PSR. But it is not clear that this is entirely true.

There do seem to be at least some "brute facts" in Della Rocca's sense in Spinoza's *Ethics*, features of the world that do not admit of an explanation. For example, we know only two of the infinity of divine attributes. This seems as brutishly fact-like as one can imagine.¹¹ Another apparently brute fact is the division between the substance and its attributes, or the distinction among three different kinds of knowledge. But there is a potentially much more damaging violation of intelligibility in the *Ethics*, connected with the denial of divine final causes in *EIapp*, and the denial of anthropomorphism.

Della Rocca, of course, takes up the question of the denial of divine final causes in *EIapp* and, unsurprisingly, argues that it follows from the PSR. His discussion is somewhat long and complex. At heart, I think that he does not really confront the general claim that God does not act with an end in mind. What he attacks—and where he employs the PSR—is in refuting the claim that God acts for the sake of one group of things (humans, for example) rather than another.

Della Rocca concedes that for Spinoza, the claim that everything follows from the *nature* of God is supposed to undermine divine final causes (81). But, he suggests, this does not close the question:

Can't a thing (i.e. God) by the necessity of its nature privilege some things above others so that the latter (the others) are for the sake of the former? Such a determined, necessary process can be seen to be no less goal directed and teleological than a process that does not follow from the necessity of the nature of a thing. (81)

This, then, is the question that Della Rocca addresses: "What's wrong with such divine intentions or goals [i.e. aiding one or another group of beings, such as humans], especially if they flow from the necessity of God's nature?" (83). And, of course, the answer is the PSR:

Let us say that a thing *x* is a finite thing for the sake of which God acts. . . . Further, let us say that God wills to bring about other finite things in order to bring about, or to aid, *x*. Those other finite things are thus, in some way, subordinated to *x*. (84)

Della Rocca claims that Spinoza's God could not do this:

[A]ny privileging of *x* in particular (or even of any finite collection of finite modes) would seem to be arbitrary, a brute fact. And, as such, Spinoza would reject it. (86)

That is, by the PSR as Della Rocca understands it, God could not act in such a way as to privilege one group of finite things over another. Note here that Della Rocca does not claim that Spinoza actually uses this argument:

I think that this is a powerful argument on Spinozistic terms for the rejection of divine ends. But does Spinoza actually argue in this way? I admit that he does not explicitly

¹¹See Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, ch. 6, though, for a very ingenious attempt at explaining this. However, his explanation depends on his theory of aspects, which not every reader will accept.

do so, but given his systematic aversion to arbitrariness, such an argument seems to be a plausible reconstruction of his thought. (86)

Again, the appeal to the PSR is more a rational reconstruction than a direct reading. Note also that this reading of *E Iapp* is rather modest: what he addresses with the appeal to the PSR is not the wholesale denial of final causes, but the more modest claim that God has no goals that could favor one thing (or group of things) over another.

But, I think, Spinoza's claim in *E Iapp* is considerably stronger than the one that Della Rocca addresses using the PSR. Spinoza is clear that there is *no* final cause, no purpose at all for things. Indeed, it is not only finite things that are at issue here: Spinoza's God does not even act *for his own sake*.¹² Spinoza means this to go quite deep, I think. It is not just that God does not favor one group of things, like us, over another, but why things are the way they are goes altogether beyond reason and reasons, as we understand them.

Spinoza makes the following statement about final causes in *E Iapp*: "Nature has no end set before it, and . . . all final causes are nothing but human fictions" (G II.80). He refers back to this in the preface to *E IV*:

For we have shown in the Appendix of Part I, that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists. For we have shown (*E IPI6*) that the necessity of nature from which he acts is the same as that from which he exists. The reason, therefore, or cause, why God, or Nature, acts, and the reason why he exists, are one and the same. As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end. Rather, as he has no principle or end of existing, so he also has none of acting. What is called a final cause is nothing but a human appetite insofar as it is considered as a principle, or primary cause, of something. (G II.206–7)

While God does nothing *for the sake of an end*, nevertheless there is a reason for God to do one thing rather than another, just as there is a reason for his existing. And that reason is found in God's nature: *What God does is just what follows from his nature. Period.* But what follows from his nature is only as comprehensible to us as his nature is. And here is where we have the ultimate sanctuary of ignorance.

Consider Harry the Horse and Eunice the Unicorn. Harry exists, but Eunice does not. As a finite mode, Harry has a finite cause within the infinite series of causes that actually exist, which explains his existence; Eunice does not have such a cause. Thus there is a reason for the existence of Harry, and a reason for the non-existence of Eunice. Hence *E IPI1d2* and *E IP28* are satisfied. Furthermore, there is a reason for the existence of the infinite causal chain that includes Harry, and a reason for the non-existence of any infinite causal chain that includes Eunice: the one follows from the nature of God, and the other does not. (Again, *E IPI1d2* is satisfied.)

But why is God's nature such that the causal chain with Harry follows, but the causal chain with Eunice does not? Why does God's nature entail that Harry exists but that Eunice does not? Here I claim that it is just a brute fact: God's nature is

¹²I thank Yitzhak Melamed for this point; see his "Sirens of Elea," 84.

such that Harry is entailed, but Eunice is not. And that this is something beyond our capacity to comprehend or explain, something for which there is no reason. We know that God is self-caused, and we know that God as substance is conceived through himself. But why it is *this* nature, the nature that entails Harry but not Eunice, that is self-caused and self-conceived seems to be beyond reasons.

But let us explore some possible ways around this strong conclusion. Della Rocca points out that there is reason to think that Spinoza's God has a will. He is surely right about that: God has a will, though it is a mode, and subordinated to his nature (see *E Ip3I*, *E Ip32c2*). And if God has a will, that will can act for an end, even if it is determined by God's nature. In a passage that I quoted earlier Della Rocca writes,

Can't a thing (i.e. God) by the necessity of its nature privilege some things above others so that the latter (the others) are for the sake of the former? Such a determined, necessary process can be seen to be no less goal-directed and teleological than a process that does not follow from the necessity of the nature of a thing. (81)

And if God can act in this way, even though God is determined by his nature, then we might find a way of justifying his choice of Harry and not Eunice.

Note that this is my suggestion, not Della Rocca's; he does not suggest this because he does not confront this problem. I am just posing it as a possible way out. It has a certain attractiveness, though. This is a way that Leibniz sometimes thought that he could get final causes into a Spinozistic necessitarian world. By his nature, God is obligated to choose the best of all possible worlds, but insofar as he chooses, he does things for a reason. So saying that something follows from the divine nature does not by itself eliminate final causes.¹³

But I am skeptical that this will save the PSR and Spinoza's super-rationalism. For one, even if Spinoza were to admit a divine will and a divine choice in this way, we still have a problem with God's nature: why is God's nature such that he necessarily chooses a world with Harry but without Eunice? And secondly, even if the will pertains to God's nature, Spinoza says, it is completely and utterly foreign to us: the divine will would be as like ours as "the dog that is a heavenly constellation and the dog that is a barking animal" (*E Ip17s2/G II.63*). So even if there were reasons, they would be completely unintelligible to us, violating the PSR as Della Rocca understands it.¹⁴ And finally, I think that this claim would be completely against the clear spirit of *E Iapp*: 'no' means no when it comes to final causes, even those that we may not comprehend.

But maybe there is still hope for Spinoza the super-rationalist. Spinoza does sometimes talk, like Leibniz, about the world being perfect because it follows from a perfect nature:

From the preceding it clearly follows that things have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect

¹³See Garber, *Leibniz*, 232.

¹⁴Della Rocca believes that God has a will, though it does not pertain to his essence. See e.g. *E Ip3I*, and Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 84. It is thus open to him to say that the divine will, a mode and not a part of the essence of God, acts by reasons that are intelligible to us. I am skeptical here, since that interpretation would go strongly against the central attack on anthropomorphism in *E Iapp* and elsewhere.

nature. Nor does this convict God of any imperfection, for his perfection compels us to affirm this. Indeed, from the opposite, it would clearly follow (as I have just shown), that God is not supremely perfect; because if things had been produced by God in another way, we would have to attribute to God another nature, different from that which we have been compelled to attribute to him from the consideration of the most perfect Being. (*EIp33s2/ G II.74*)

This suggests a kind of reason for why God's nature is such that Harry follows from it, but Eunice does not: the perfect nature is such that it entails Harry but not Eunice.

But what does perfection mean here? Here is Spinoza's definition: "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing" (*EII d6*). We have to remember that '*perfectus*' in Latin means "complete," and to say that God's nature is perfect is just to say that it is complete, that it contains all possible reality. Which it does. If something—Eunice, say—does not follow from the divine nature, then she is not possible, not because she contains an internal contradiction (which I am supposing that she does not), but simply because her real temporal existence does not follow from the divine nature.

Consider the following passage, where Spinoza denies the existence of unactualized possibles:

Moreover, though they conceive God to actually understand in the highest degree, they still do not believe that he can bring it about that all the things he actually understands exist. For they think that in that way they would destroy God's power. . . . Indeed—to speak openly—my opponents seem to deny God's omnipotence. For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create. For otherwise, if he created everything he understood [NS: to be creatable] he would (according to them) exhaust his omnipotence and render himself imperfect. Therefore to maintain that God is perfect, they are driven to maintain at the same time that he cannot bring about everything to which his power extends. I do not see what could be feigned which would be more absurd than this or more contrary to God's omnipotence. (*EIp17s/G II.62*)

Spinoza's opponent wants to say that God *could* have created Eunice, but that he just did not. Spinoza, on the other hand, wants to say that the very fact that God did not create her (that is, did not cause an infinite series of finite things in which Eunice can be found) *makes* it necessary that she not exist.¹⁵ To think otherwise would be to suppose that there is something that God could have made but did not, which would limit his omnipotence. Whatever actually follows from the divine nature *defines* the domain of the possible for Spinoza; what does not follow from the divine nature must be considered impossible, strictly speaking, odd as that may sound. In this way it is the divine nature that is the standard of what is possible and impossible. Much the same can be said for perfection. What God causes is perfect

¹⁵By *EIp29*: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way." Also, by *EIp33*: "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced." Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Eunice may be possible for Spinoza. By *EIVd4* "I call . . . singular things possible, insofar as, while we attend to the causes from which they must be produced, we do not know whether those causes are determined to produce them." As Kurt Smith suggested to me, Spinoza does not really distinguish here between logical, metaphysical, or physical necessity.

because it follows from his nature; it does not follow from his nature *because* it is perfect. Reality just is what God causes, nothing more, nothing less.

Here is another interesting passage that is connected with the issue:

I confess that this opinion, which subjects all things to a certain indifferent will of God, and makes all things depend on his good pleasure, is nearer the truth than that of those who maintain that God does all things for the sake of the good. For they seem to place something outside God, which does not depend on God, to which God attends, as a model, in what he does, and at which he aims, as at a certain goal. This is simply to subject God to fate. Nothing more absurd can be maintained about God, whom we have shown to be the first and only free cause, both of the essence of all things, and of their existence. So I shall waste no time in refuting this absurdity. (*E Ip33s/G II.76*)

In this passage, Spinoza introduces what we might call the “divine good pleasure” account of how things happen. On this view, 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. Spinoza does not want to hold exactly this position because he does not want to attribute a will to God, or at least not as part of his nature. But he does have a certain sympathy for the 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.¹⁶ Which is to say, God’s nature just is what it is, and this is where all reasons stop. *Whatever* may follow from the divine nature is real and perfect (the two are the same), but you cannot ask *why* God’s nature is such that A follows rather than B, while it entails Harry but not Eunice. It just does. And this seems pretty brute to me. That is to say, there is no reason why God’s nature is this way rather than that.

So, it seems to me that it is a brute fact that this world rather than some other world follows from the divine nature, something that goes beyond any human capacity for understanding. Now, none of this violates the principles of intelligibility that Spinoza explicitly endorses. Harry has a cause in the infinite series of causes, and Eunice does not, satisfying *E Ip28*; and the infinite series with Harry has God’s nature as a cause but the infinite series with Eunice does not, so there is a reason for their existence and non-existence, satisfying the *E Ip11d2* principle. Furthermore, everything in the infinite series that exists satisfies the laws of nature. But at the heart there is something for which a reason cannot be given: why God’s nature is such that the one series follows from it and the other does not. This looks to me like a brute fact, not in violation of any principle of intelligibility that Spinoza explicitly endorses, but in violation of the strong version of the PSR that Della Rocca reads into Spinoza.

¹⁶This is a bit tricky. For one, the “good pleasure” view does presuppose that God has a will that he can use freely, something that Spinoza certainly denies. And secondly, as Yitzhak Melamed has emphasized to me, there is a way in which Spinoza’s God is bound by logic. See e.g. *E Ip1781 (G II.61)*: Spinoza wants to deny that God “can bring it about that it would not follow from the nature of a triangle that its three angles are equal to two right angles.” But in this case, I think that the right way of thinking about this is that geometrical truths like this are eternal truths that are part of the divine intellect. They are, of course, not chosen by God in the way in which Descartes imagined God choosing which eternal truths to create. But like everything else in the realm of the divine intellect, they are necessary. In this respect logic and geometry are not *constraints* any more than any other necessary truths are.

To summarize where we are at this point, I would agree that Spinoza certainly does believe that the world is largely intelligible, and largely intelligible to us. But even so, this falls short of Spinoza the super-rationalist. So far as I can see, there are no grounds for attributing to the actual historical Spinoza the very strong version of the PSR that Della Rocca has attributed to him, the claim that there are no brute facts. Indeed, there are no grounds to attribute to him any general principles of intelligibility except for the ones that he actually acknowledges, in particular (1) the weak version of the PSR he announces in *E Ip11d2*, that there must be a reason for the existence or non-existence of any thing, (2) the principle that every finite thing has a finite cause (*E Ip28*), and (3) the claim that there are universal and inviolable laws of nature. But even though the world is largely intelligible, there are still some brutish facts that Spinoza is obligated to acknowledge. Most notably, so far as I can see, there is no explanation for why the nature of God is the way it is, this way rather than that way, such that the real temporal existence of Harry the Horse follows from the divine nature but Eunice the Unicorn does not.

There is one last point to make, perhaps more important than the detailed arguments that we have been considering up until now, a point that concerns the larger picture of Spinoza that is at issue here. Della Rocca wants to make of Spinoza a “pure” philosopher. By that I assume that he means a philosopher largely or entirely driven by abstract philosophical concerns: by intelligibility, by the PSR, by working out the consequences of being a rationalist in the purest and most philosophically rigorous way. He writes,

I will endeavor to narrate a story, one not without suspense. We will see the increasing power of the PSR, how more and more of the traditional problems and themes of philosophy begin—in Spinoza’s capable hands—to fall under its sway. (11)

This purity, this single-mindedness of purpose is central to the view of Spinoza as a superhero in the history of philosophy.

I do not think that this is an accurate representation of the real historical Spinoza. The intelligibility of the world was certainly important to Spinoza: it is what stands behind his denial of miracles, his insistence that every finite thing has a finite cause, and that everything, human emotions included, follows inviolable laws of nature. But there was more to the real historical Spinoza than that. 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. In a famous passage from the early *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza writes,

After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, and I saw that all the things which were the cause or object of my fear had nothing of good or bad in themselves, except insofar as [my] mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something

which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity. (*TdIE* §1)

If there is a central narrative in the *Ethics* (and there may not be one), it is not working out the consequences of the PSR, but rather taking us from the despair of living in a world without meaning to the pleasures of a life together with others and ultimately to the rational salvation that we can hope for. The intelligibility of the world—to the extent that it *is* intelligible—is certainly a tool that Spinoza uses to bring us along on the journey. But, I would argue, it is not itself the motivation for the journey. Furthermore, even if there is a central narrative in the *Ethics*, it is not entirely clear that the narrative in the *Ethics* is the same narrative that one finds in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* or the *Tractatus Politicus*. And how to balance these apparently different narratives, the emphasis on the individual in Part Five of the *Ethics* and the emphasis on politics and the social dimension in Part Four of the *Ethics* and in his political works, the emphasis on becoming more rational in the *Ethics* and the emphasis on religion and biblical testimony in the *TTP* is not evident. Perhaps the historical Spinoza was not as focused and single-minded as we like our superheroes to be.

4. FINAL THOUGHTS: WHITHER SUPERHEROES IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?

While Della Rocca and I certainly have a number of substantive differences about how to read Spinoza's philosophy, probably deeper are the methodological differences about what one is doing when doing the history of philosophy.

I strongly suspect that Della Rocca knows perfectly well that what he is concerned with in his book *Spinoza* is not exactly the historical Spinoza, but a kind of rational reconstruction of Spinoza's project. I have pointed out that in many places Della Rocca does not say that this *is* what Spinoza says, but only that this is what he *could* say, or that this would *make sense* of the conclusions that he reaches, even if he did not use this reasoning to get there. It is Spinoza shorn of the historical contingencies, Spinoza purified, the interesting philosophical program that underlies what the perhaps imperfectly rational (and imperfectly rationalist) Spinoza actually wrote.

Despite the somewhat critical tone of my remarks, I by no means mean to dismiss Della Rocca's project. Rational reconstruction has a long and noble history. Imre Lakatos, for example, famously suggested that when writing history of science, one should put the rational reconstruction in the text, and the actual, contingent history in the footnotes, indicating "how actual history 'misbehaved' in the light of its rational reconstruction."¹⁷ Similarly, in a wonderful essay on methodology in the history of philosophy, Lisa Downing talks about a practice at Princeton in the late 1980s, when she was a student. Rather than talking about "Spinoza," say, one would talk about "Spinoza*," pronounced "Spinoza star." This gave one the freedom to develop a philosopher's views in a systematic way, without worrying too much about whether the philosopher in question actually saw everything that we

¹⁷Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, 120.

can see in his or her position.¹⁸ As a style of doing the history of philosophy, this seems perfectly defensible. It has its drawbacks, but it also has its advantages in allowing the commentator philosophical freedom, and in allowing her the ability to play up the philosophically interesting bits in a philosopher's corpus.

In addition to being a kind of rational reconstruction, Della Rocca's Spinoza is created as a kind of ideal type, an ideal type of the Rationalist. Superheroes in the history of philosophy play an important role in philosophical argumentation: the history of philosophy so read is a source of archetypes for philosophical argumentation. Such ideal types, Rationalists and Empiricists, for example, have a number of roles to play in contemporary argument. They can provide models for how we might work out positions on philosophical issues, both philosophical issues that have been confronted in the past, and those that our ancestors had not dealt with. They individuate "camps" that can be opposed to one another to define positions and clarify issues. In this way they can provide touchstones for positions taken or rejected or proposed. One can, for example, use them as idealized opponents ("... contrary to what The Rationalist might say, I say...") or as a reference point for a position taken ("... like The Empiricist, I hold that..."). In this way they can be regarded as shorthand for a series of doctrines that hang together in a certain way, even if no historical figure actually instantiates all of the doctrines. (In this respect, it is sometimes useful to give these clusters of doctrines distinctive names so that they can more easily be referenced: "... as Spinoza held..." meaning the idealized Spinoza and not necessarily the historical figure of that name.) They also have roles to play as models for how we fashion ourselves as philosophers: they give us one conception of how the philosophical enterprise works. On this view, we choose to belong to a camp, which gives us certain guidance as we work out positions on particular issues. And finally, they can be very useful as pedagogical tools for teaching figures in the history of philosophy: they give us a key to understanding complex historical figures and explaining them to our students. One way of helping our students enter into the history of philosophy is through these kinds of simplifications and, as it were, purifications of the complex historical figures, making them more intelligible and more easily comprehensible to beginning students.

Personally, I prefer real historical figures in all their complexity. While superheroes have their place, I prefer the satisfaction that comes from immersing oneself in the twists and turns, the ambiguities and inconsistencies of real historical thinkers. Even so, the consideration of superheroes in the history of philosophy raises interesting and important methodological issues about how one does the history of philosophy, and *why* one does the history of philosophy.¹⁹

¹⁸Downing, "Old History," 20–21. Her example is actually "Locke*."

¹⁹When I conceived this paper, it was with the intention that it be followed by a direct reply by Della Rocca, the main target of my remarks. I would like to thank him warmly for agreeing to participate in this very illuminating discussion, from which I have learned a lot about his views and approach, and mine as well. I am sure that the dialogue will continue. I would also like to thank Ursula Goldenbaum and Sam Newlands for a delightful email exchange that led me to some of these ideas, and the following colleagues for comments on an earlier version of my text: Yitzhak Melamed, Kurt Smith, Steve Nadler, Martin Lin, and Mogens Laerke.