

# SPINOZISM AS A RADICAL ANTI-NIHILISM

## Spinoza on Being and Valuableness of Being

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**Abstract:** Spinozism – i.e. the overall worldview Spinoza is assumed to have advocated in his philosophy – is often said to fail, when it comes at providing guidance in people’s search for a meaningful life, for two reasons. Whereas some accuse Spinozism of relying on conceptual or theoretical inconsistencies, others deny that it can ever be believed by any subject. In this paper, both kinds of objections are refuted. It argues that even if Spinozism falls prey to inconsistencies, this does not necessarily ruin its existential value, as we are generally quite good at quite combining maxims from different or even competing systems in an eclectic manner. The problem of non-believability, by contrast, is a real challenge, but it only arises on the adoption of a strictly Eleatic reading, whereas on other readings of Spinoza’s metaphysics that have room for the reality of subjective experience the problem of non-believable does not arise. The paper concludes by showing how, on this reading, Spinozism responds to our existential quests. Spinoza is assumed to hold the twofold view that being is inherently positive and that we are acquainted with this positivity of being just by being the kinds of things we are: reflective embodied subjects. We know what being is, we know how valuable it is, and we know that we do so. What Spinozism has to offer is simply the concepts by which we come to see and trust this knowledge of ours.

**Keywords:** Fichte, anti-nihilism, valuableness of being, problem of non-believability, Spinozism, subjective experience

It is a longstanding complaint in Spinoza scholarship that Spinozism -- Spinoza’s metaphysical outlook on God or the world and the human beings in it -- is of no use in one’s attempts to improve one’s life, however appealing his texts may appear to readers in their search for sustainable happiness.

Personally, I cannot share this dissatisfaction. Having worked on Spinoza for decades now, I have taken many a lesson from his philosophy. It not only provides me with an understanding of politics that I would never have gotten without it, but it also comprises much prudential advice that turns out to be pretty useful in daily life. Even more to the point, my understanding of Spinoza’s metaphysical project has developed in a direction

that is truly illuminating in reflections on my own condition and my existential quests for meaning in life.

However, while this experience guides the following considerations, it is not apt to invalidate the experiences of others. Instead of simply exposing and elaborating on them I will begin, therefore, by discerning two types of objections against Spinozism as a way of life (section I): one consists in the identification of incoherencies in the concepts underlying Spinoza's ethical thought, whereas the other contends that Spinozism, or some particular key doctrine, cannot possibly be believed from a first-personal perspective. The first, I will argue, relies on questionable premises about the prerequisites of a meaningful philosophical response to existential questions, despite its largely legitimate concerns.

By contrast, the second type of objections is pressing: it points to a problem -- call it 'the problem of non-believability' -- which, if it really arises, is apt to undermine the existential efficacy of Spinozism from the outset. So, unless one can show that the problem of non-believability does not arise, living according to the guidelines of the *Ethics* is a futile enterprise. It is against this background that in the second section I shall examine whether or not the problem of non-believability necessarily arises in Spinoza. My point will be that this problem only arises, if one adopts a strictly Eleatic reading of Spinoza's metaphysics. I will continue, in section three, with a sketch of an alternative reading that has room for the reality of subjective experience. Section four concludes the paper with a short discussion of how this changes the understanding of Spinozism's existential lessons.

## 1.

Complaints about existential or practical uselessness of Spinozism come, roughly, in two versions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I neglect accounts that accuse Spinoza's doctrine of falsity or lack of relevance, since, apparently, even trivial or false belief may sometimes improve the situation of the subject entertaining it. This is because relevance is a contextual property: in a given situation, subjects may find seeming trivial things insightful. False beliefs, on the other hand, can be quite comforting, and unless one values truth and truthfulness higher than wellbeing, there is nothing morally false in entertaining false belief that is of no harm to anyone. Thus, unlike in scientific inquiry, lack of relevance and falsity are not necessarily a vice.

1) Interpreters have time and again raised objections to the effect that some contention in Spinoza's theory of freedom and happiness established in Part V of the *Ethics* suffers from inconsistencies that are irresolvable on Spinoza's own terms. A few examples: (a) In his *Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Jonathan Bennett pointed out that Spinoza's definition of freedom in terms of causal self-sufficiency is in tension with the notion of voluntary control of affections underlying several of Spinoza's claims concerning morality, since only the latter but not the former allows for sensory experience or beliefs acquired through the senses.<sup>2</sup> (b) In a remarkable, but largely neglected article, Thomas Cook articulated the worry that Spinoza's rational therapy of our negative affects is not viable on his own terms. Given Spinoza's views on reason and the imagination, it is just not conceivable how we should ever be in a position to form an adequate idea of any mental state that entails inadequate ideas.<sup>3</sup> (c) In a recent article published in this journal, Andrea Sangiacomo charged Spinoza's doctrine of the intellectual love of God with being inherently mistaken. Being an instance of joy, love is essentially dynamical: it is or expresses a process of transition. But how can there be a process of joy that is conditioned by some eternal object?<sup>4</sup> (4) In an earlier paper, I questioned whether self-love can meaningfully be attributed to a God that has been denied all characteristics of persons, and I concluded that this sets limits to how one can read and appeal to Spinoza's notion of the *amor Dei intellectualis*.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of objection may appear threatening for practitioners in Spinozism. I indeed think that, as Spinoza scholars, we have to take them seriously, as they may challenge his entire system. Still, when it comes to the question of Spinozism's merits with respect to its giving advice for a meaningful life, internal inconsistencies need not be as ruinous as one might think at first. Inconsistent views become discomforting only when their inconsistency is noticed by the subject. But as long as this is not the case, they can be quite efficient. Generally, when it comes to self-help issues, we are perhaps even better off, if we adopt a well-balanced, but ultimately eclectic attitude. E.g. while stoicism might help in cases of anger, Augustine is likely to be better at consoling us when we mourn for our dearest, despite our potential unwillingness to accept all his metaphysical views. Note, finally, that these inconsistencies are all due to the way in which some contention is spelt out in Spinoza's technical terminology. Unless we can show that both the technical terminology itself is working and a given reconstruction is sound, we need not reject otherwise plausible assumptions just because they turn out to be inconsistent with the framework of Spinozism.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan BENNETT, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis 1984, pp. 324-328.

Hence, complaints based on objections of inconsistency are conditional on requirements like unity, coherence and technical explicability. Whereas these are good standards for philosophical systems, they are not necessarily to be expected from views we consult for prudential advice or wisdom. In any case, I doubt that many of the classics from Plato to Seneca, Plutarch to Montaigne, Emerson to Camus, which we all value for their understanding of human concerns, always meet these requirements.

2) Another type of concern has recently been discussed by Yitzhak Melamed in his exposition of Spinoza's views on the causes of our belief in free will. As he points out, Spinoza's view on freedom is more complex than is often assumed by people who bewail Spinoza's denial of free will. Spinoza does not just deny free will, but this denial is also corroborated by a causal explanation of our belief in free will, on which people necessarily believe in free will.<sup>6</sup>

Now, to elaborate on his view, Melamed quotes Fichte who claimed:

Spinoza could not have been convinced of his own philosophy. He could only have thought of it; he could not have believed it. For this is a philosophy that directly contradicts those convictions that Spinoza must necessarily have adopted in his everyday life, by virtue of which he had to consider himself to be free and self-sufficient [...]. He was convinced that a purely objective mode of thinking [Raisonnement] must necessarily lead to his system, and he was right about this. But in the course of his thoughts it never

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. COOK, *Affektive Erkenntnis und Erkenntnis der Affekte. Ein Problem der spinozischen Ethik*, in Achim ENGSTLER and Robert SCHNEPF (eds.), *Affekte und Ethik. Spinozas Lehre im Kontext*, Georg Olms, Hildesheim 2002, p. 165f.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea SANGIACOMO, *Spinoza's mistake: the desire for eternal joy*, in this section of "InCircolo", pp. 399-417.

<sup>5</sup> Ursula RENZ, *Zum Verhältnis von Fühlen und Erkennen bei Spinoza*, in Violetta L. WAIBEL (ed.), *Affektenlehre und amor Dei intellectualis. Die Rezeption Spinozas im Deutschen Idealismus, in der Frühromantik und in der Gegenwart*, Hamburg (Meiner), 2012, 49-61. I still think this is a real problem that sets strong limits to what one can meaningfully do with Spinozism, but it does not undermine the reading I am establishing in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Yitzhak J. MELAMED, *The Causes of Our Belief in Free Will: Spinoza on Necessary, 'Innate', yet False Cognition*, in Yitzhak J. MELAMED (ed.), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 121-142. In one point, Melamed's otherwise succinct reading remains somewhat vague: he does not specify what the assumption of necessary belief in free will precisely entails. Strictly speaking, that people necessarily believe in free will, implies that people *always* believe in free will. On less strict reading, it merely suggests that *all* people necessarily have and can thus not avoid the belief in free will; this would mean that people are all – by being people – acquainted with this belief, but they do perhaps not in any instance of their life actually embrace it.

Most probably, it is the latter view that Melamed wishes to attribute to Spinoza, or else it is not conceivable how Spinoza's explanation of the causal determination of our will could possibly have the therapeutic effect Melamed takes it to have.

occurred to him to reflect upon his own act of thinking; this is where he went astray, and this is how came to place his speculations in contradiction with his life.<sup>7</sup>

On this interpretation, there is an insurmountable gap between the conclusions Spinoza draws in his system and the convictions he must have embraced in his everyday life. Notably, Fichte concedes that Spinoza's arguments are conclusive, but they are not sound, since they are derived from a wrong point of departure. Hence his point is metaphysical, not logical: Spinoza's philosophy is unbelievable, not because it is incoherent, but because it rests on assumptions one cannot possibly embrace as a subject that comprehends itself as a free and self-sufficient agent. Thus, as Melamed rightly points out, Fichte's objection that Spinozism is a non-believable philosophy relies on the assumption of an irreducible difference between the "objective mode of thinking" and the first-personal point of view which we adopt when we regard ourselves as spontaneous subjects.

Melamed agrees with Fichte on both points: the interpretation of Spinoza's system as suggesting a decidedly objective outlook and the assumption of a gap between the subjective and the objective view-point. However, he deviates from Fichte in the way he reads Spinoza against the background of this gap. Rather than taking it to constitute a flaw in Spinoza's system, Melamed takes Spinoza to have noticed this gap and to have already responded to it in his ethical project. On his reading, Spinoza thus relies on a diagnosis about the human condition. On this diagnosis, it is just our false understanding of our actions and desires in terms of what we want or choose that makes us suffer, and were it not for this condition, much suffering could be avoided. Hence, Melamed departs from Fichte by assuming that Spinoza's *Ethics*, and more specifically his necessitarian metaphysics, are meant to provide a therapy against the sufferings that are the offspring of this condition.<sup>8</sup>

How shall we assess these two accounts of Spinozism? To begin with, it is worth mentioning that Melamed is not alone in attributing this sort of therapy to Spinoza; this is a rather frequent view. It is often assumed that by engaging with Spinoza's system (or with the kind of explanation it offers), we get a more neutral and appropriate grasp of the causation of our personal motivations. This may result in a condition, where we stop identifying ourselves with the impulses driving us, even though we perhaps still feel

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<sup>7</sup> I quote here from the edition by Breazeale, see Johann Gottlieb FICHTE, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, tr. and ed. by Daniel BREAZEALE, Hackett, Indianapolis 1994, p. 98.

<sup>8</sup> Yitzhak J. MELAMED, *The Causes of Our Belief in Free Will: Spinoza on Necessary, 'Innate', yet False Cognition*, in Yitzhak J. MELAMED (ed.), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, 138f.

them, with the result that we become less neurotic, more integrated persons.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Melamed's proposal relies on a legitimate interpretation and it offers a sound understanding of the therapeutic functioning of Spinoza's philosophy.

As a solution to Fichte's problem, however, it does not work. And this is why: Fichte's worry is not just that any first-personal understanding of our actions and desires involves seeing them as the choices of our will, but that *believing*, or, in his terms, *being convinced*, is an essentially first-personal doing. His denial that Spinoza *believes in his own philosophy* must be taken strictly: it is a statement about the lack of believability of Spinoza's entire system, and not merely about Spinoza's action-theoretical views.

For a therapeutic reading, this objection is a problem. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Fichte's objection of non-believability is correct. Clearly, then, the option to correct our initial first-personal understanding of our actions and desires by the insight into Spinoza's necessitarian metaphysics does not exist. Why not? Consider what it would require to therapeutically *contrast* or even to *correct* our first-personal self-understanding by the contemplation of a more neutral view. It would require that we adopt the latter from a first-personal stance, otherwise such contemplation would not have a grip on our mental life, in which case it would thus have no therapeutic effect at all. This means either that Fichte is right in assuming that Spinozism is a non-believable philosophy, but then we are doomed to the first-personal outlook on our life that Melamed takes to be the cause of most of our suffering. Or, Fichte is wrong and the problem of Spinozism's non-believability does not exist. But there is no further alternative: it cannot be the case that Fichte is right and that there is a way out of the problem of non-believability.

So far, I haven't determined yet whether the problem of non-believability arises in Spinoza's philosophy and whether Fichte's objection is correct. This a very deep question which deserves to be examined in more depth. For now, let me conclude this section by pointing out that the real challenge for any attempt at living according to Spinozist guidelines, does not lie in any of those conceptual inconsistencies of which Spinoza's philosophy is frequently accused, for these can more-or-less easily be blended out. If Spinozism fails at responding to a human's existential quests, it fails for its non-believability.

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<sup>9</sup> See e.g. for a classical example Stuart HAMPSHIRE, *Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom* (1962), in *Spinoza and Spinozism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2005., or more recently Samuel NEWLANDS, *Spinozistic Selves*, in "Journal of the American Philosophical Association", n. 6, v. 1, 2020, pp. 16-35.

## 2.

We now come to the fundamental question: Does Spinozism fall prey to the problem of non-believability, as Fichte contends it does? Or can it be defended against this objection?

This problem has two aspects. On the one hand, it touches on the issue of the metaphysics of belief. Does believing, which I take to be same as Fichte’s “being convinced of”, require first-personal engagement, and if so, of what sort is this engagement? Must it involve the kind of reflection that Fichte misses in Spinozism? On the other hand, there is the question of whether Spinoza’s philosophy is incompatible with all first-personal engagement and especially, of course, with that kind of first-personality that is required for belief. In what follows, I shall begin by saying a few words on (Fichte’s views about) the metaphysics of belief; it will turn out, however, that this has strong implications for the way in which we can or cannot interpret Spinoza’s view on first-person-standpoints.

There is certainly some truth in the view that believing is always a first-personal doing: a belief only exists, if there is at least one subject who has it. That is, the instantiation of some belief  $p$  depends on someone’s endorsing  $p$ , at least implicitly, from her first-personal point of view.

What does this imply for the reading of Spinoza’s system? This much is clear: if instantiation of belief requires first-personal engagement by some subject – and I cannot see how this assumption could be false – then, any reading on which there is no first-personal standpoint at all in Spinoza’s system also precludes the existence of belief. This means that any Eleatic reading that denies that there is conceptual space for subjectivity in Spinoza, must, by implication, also deny conceptual space for belief. Therefore, if this was Fichte’s understanding of Spinozism, then his objection of non-believability would be valid. However, this is not Fichte’s reading of Spinoza;<sup>10</sup> if it were, it would contradict his view that Spinoza was convinced of the consequences of his system, as in Eleatic Spinozism, there lacks conceptual space for *all* belief. We can assume that Fichte had something different in mind, when he claimed that “Spinoza could not have been convinced by his own philosophy”.

What, then, did Fichte have in mind?

At this point, it is helpful to consider how, in the same text, Fichte discusses Kant’s views on the role of the first person. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in §16 of the

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<sup>10</sup> See Johannes HAAG, *Fichte on the Consciousness of Spinoza’s God*, in Eckhard FÖRSTER and Yitzhak J. MELAMED (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 100-120., for an astute analysis.

transcendental deduction, Kant famously claims that “the *I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would be either impossible or else at least would be nothing for me.” (B 132). In elaborating on this claim, Kant specifies the representation of this *I think* itself as follows:

But this representation is an act of *spontaneity*, i.e. it cannot be regarded as belonging to sensibility. I call it the *pure apperception*, in order to distinguish it from the empirical one, or also the *original apperception*, since it is that self-consciousness which, because it produces the representation *I think*, which must be able to accompany all others and which in all consciousness is one and the same, cannot be accompanied by any further representation.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to see how Fichte, who also quoted this passage, comments on the difference between Kant’s views on transcendental apperception and his own idea of a *Wissenschaftslehre*. He begins by praising Kant’s description of the nature of pure self-consciousness and by underlining what he takes to be parallels of Kantianism and his own *Wissenschaftslehre*:

What, according to the quoted passage, is the relationship Kant thinks this pure I bears to all consciousness? The pure I provides the conditions for all consciousness. Thus, just as in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, so too for Kant as well: the possibility of all consciousness is conditioned by the possibility of the I, or of pure self-consciousness... It therefore follows that even according to Kant a systematic derivation of consciousness as a whole (or, what amounts to the same thing, a philosophical system) would have to begin with the pure I – which is precisely how the *Wissenschaftslehre* does begin – and that the Idea of such a science has already been provided by Kant himself.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, on Fichte’s reading, Kant’s and his approach share the intuition that underlying all philosophy is some sort of pure apperception or self-consciousness. Fichte continues, however, by drawing an important distinction on which basis he then discerns the two approaches:

One may, however, wish to weaken the force of this argument by making the following distinction: It is one thing to be conditioned; to be determined is something else altogether. According to Kant, all consciousness is merely conditioned by self-consciousness; i.e., the contents of consciousness can still be grounded by or have their foundation in something or other outside of self-consciousness. Things that are grounded in this way must simply

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<sup>11</sup> I quote here from the edition by Guyer and Wood, see Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87), tr. and ed. by Paul GUYER and Allen W. WOOD, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Johann Gottlieb FICHTE, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, tr. and ed. by Daniel BREAZEALE, Hackett, Indianapolis 1994, p. 62.

not contradict the conditions of self-consciousness; that is to say, they must simply not annul the possibility of self-consciousness, but they do not actually have to be generated from self-consciousness.

According to the Wissenschaftslehre, all consciousness is determined by self-consciousness; i.e., everything that occurs within consciousness has its foundation in the conditions that make self-consciousness possible – that is to say is given and is produced thereby and possesses no foundation whatsoever outside of self-consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, Fichte thinks that while Kant is right in his emphasis of the spontaneous nature of pure self-consciousness as well as in his assumption that self-consciousness constitutes a necessary condition for all thought, he takes him to be wrong in treating self-consciousness as a merely formal prerequisite rather than a content-determining factor.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Fichte's own idea is that self-consciousness is a condition of the determination or even generation of belief content, and not just of the instantiation of thought or belief. Thus, Fichte draws a distinction between two ways in which self-consciousness may be taken to be necessary for belief: self-consciousness can be seen as a *formal requirement* of belief (that's the view Fichte attributes to Kant), or it can be taken as its essential *content-determining principle* (that's his own position).

But what does it mean to employ self-consciousness as a content-determining principle? Fichte elaborates on this question by way of describing how, according to his Wissenschaftslehre, philosophy is supposed to work: in philosophy, we are to adopt a reflective yet irreducibly first-personal stance, from which stance we are to consider how some particular content is produced in, or rather by, the I. Hence, unlike in Kant's transcendental philosophy, the I is taken to play a double role in Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre: it is at the same time the origin of the reasoned content and the reasoning subject. Adopting the view-point of the latter, the philosopher contemplates how some thought is produced in or by the I. This explains how or in which sense the content of belief can be understood as determined by the I: any thought is to be observed or contemplated in its becoming, or in its being produced by the I, and as such it is then also comprehended and endorsed.

Let us now compare this with the philosophical project of the *Ethics*. In it, Spinoza does not reflect on the contents of our self-consciousness from a first-personal point of view; instead, he reflects on the concepts that we are to employ in our grasp of reality

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Note that is more room for controversy here than Fichte's presentation of the difference between Kant's and his own approach suggests. As this is beyond the point of this paper, I cannot discuss this in detail, but see also Ursula RENZ, *Becoming aware of one's thoughts*, in Danièle MYOAL-SHARROCK, Volker MUNZ, and Annalisa COLIVA (eds.), *Mind, Language and Action. Proceedings of the 36th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.

(i.e. God, substance, nature, or all together) as well as of all sorts of singular things (i.e. particular bodies and minds). To the latter category also belong our own body, our own mind and all those sorts of things that are like us in having a body and a mental life. So, there is room for subjects and subjective view-points in the *Ethics*, but Spinoza does not employ the notion of human subjectivity to derive his ontological vocabulary.

Hence, Spinoza's ontology is not idealist, at least not in the sense that all beings are dependent on a mind like ours, and this is, roughly speaking, also Fichte's view who takes Spinoza's system as the ideal-typical form of dogmatism. To use a more recent terminology, one could also say he interprets Spinozism as some sort of philosophically reflected common-sense realism. This not only confirms our previous assumption that Fichte's non-believability objection does not result from an Eleatic reading of the *Ethics*; it also shows that this objection is simply the flipside of Fichte's contention that all true belief, and this means: all philosophical conviction rests on idealist grounds or on the notion that the I is essential to the determination of the content of belief, rather than a mere prerequisite of its instantiation.

We are now in a position to give at least a provisional answer to the question we have set ourselves in this section. That Fichte's objection of non-believability is the flipside of his own idealism means that this objection is right to the extent to which Fichte's approach relies on the right metaphysics of belief. If he is right in contending that belief or conviction are essentially the outcomes of philosophical reflection or of the contemplation of contents in their becoming, then his verdict against Spinozism must also be right. If, however, this contention is false, or only partially right – i.e. if belief contents are only partially, but not thoroughgoingly, determined by the I – then there is room for defending Spinozism against Fichte's charge.

Now, I must confess, I have not elaborated the issue of what determines the contents of belief. In my experience, however, there are least some beliefs regarding which I have no clue where they come from and how they might be generated. In other words, in my descriptive metaphysics there is room for beliefs endorsing contents which are not entirely determined by the I. Perhaps these are not convictions in Fichte's sense of the word, but in any case, this being so, I take it, there is room for a reading of Spinozism that is not subject to the problem of non-believability.

### 3.

So far, I have argued that the Fichtean objection of non-believability relies on a problematic metaphysics of belief which is at odds with the descriptive metaphysics we use in ascribing beliefs to ourselves and others in ordinary life. If, by contrast, one rejects

the Fichtean metaphysics of belief, there is room for a reading of Spinoza's philosophy, on which it may be taken as responding to our existential quests. But what would such a reading would look like? In the remainder of this paper, I shall address this question in two steps. In this section, I will provide a short outlook on the metaphysical framework, before I conclude, in the next section, with a few words about the existential lessons Spinoza's philosophy has to offer on this reading.

To begin with, recall that a crucial insight of the previous discussion has been that any such reading must allow for the existence of finite subjects and first-personal viewpoints. We have also seen that Eleatic readings do not satisfy this requirement: they do not take finite subjects to be real entities and thus tend to reject the concerns raised by finite subjects as illusionary questions.

One might say that rather few scholars actually take Spinoza to have advocated an Eleatic metaphysics in the *Ethics*. On a widespread interpretation, finite beings are perhaps less real in Spinozism than God or substance, but they are not considered as non-real objects or illusionary phenomena. This means that although humans are not taken to exist in the same eminent way as God, they are also not reduced to mere illusion, as a radical Eleatism would have.

This – which we may refer to as the moderately Eleatic understanding of Spinoza's metaphysics – is certainly in a better position, when it comes to account for the situation of people and, thus, for human concerns. I am afraid, though, that all this moderately Eleatic Spinozism has to offer in response to our existential quests is a lesson in humility; it basically tells us “Don't think yourself important!” This is certainly a wise advice in a lot of situations, but not all existential suffering derives from people's taking themselves as too important. In other words, it points to the relative non-importance of finite concerns, but it doesn't provide us with any indication of what we should instead focus on. At this point, the advocate of a moderately Eleatic Spinozism might intervene and tell me: “You have forgotten the most and only important thing in Spinoza: God! Nature! Substance! This is what we should value and this is what we should love, if we look for meaning in life!”

I agree that this is indeed what Spinozism (on any but the most radically Eleatic reading) has to offer: there is, he thinks, an eminently positive thing which both is and grounds all being. His metaphysics is, in other words, radically anti-nihilist, which also does not just entail, but *is* an ethical doctrine, and once we have established this, it needs just one more step to get to the point where the relevance of Spinozism for our ordinary life shows up: that the being which grounds all being is an eminently positive thing implies that all particular entities partake in this positivity, and this means that they themselves, by their own being, are valuable, or in Spinoza's words, perfect, since

their essence or their way of existence is their perfection.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the gist of the moral behind all Spinozisms is this: There is nothing to complain about concerning the lack of meaning in your life, and if you don't see this, you just do not have the right concept of being, on which being as being is valuable.

This said, I am nevertheless not entirely happy with the moderately Eleatic reading – not for what it says, but for what it does not say. It says that to the extent I have got a grasp of the basic conviction underlying Spinoza's metaphysics, I do not have to worry about the meaning of life. But it does not tell me how I can get this insight, except through the reading and proper understanding of the *Ethics*. Is this really satisfying? Can we accept that such an important insight touching on the meaningfulness of our life requires understanding of one the most difficult philosophical texts that has ever been written?

To speak for myself: I don't find this satisfying. Generally, I am skeptical about philosophical doctrines that ask for this sort of entrance ticket, unless they deal with technical stuff. But when it comes to ethics, or, what is the same here, the core of metaphysics, what turns out to be true in philosophy must be accessible for all humans, not just for philosophers. Thus, if a system requires knowledge of the same system, this makes me suspicious of whether there is not something deeply wrong with it – or with its established readings. In other words, doctrines that are both true and important for our lives, must be identifiable from within our lives, with or without the help of some philosophical doctrine. In still other words, any philosophical thought that is to respond to our existential quests must do so by making us see what is already there in our life, not by the teaching of some entirely new world-view. This is why I also reject the moderately Eleatic reading of Spinozism on which we must comprehend how things inhere in God in order to see their valuableness.

#### 4.

What would an alternative reading of Spinoza's metaphysics look like, that does not turn him into some sort of Eleatic thinker? A couple of years ago, I elaborated such a reading in detail;<sup>16</sup> here, though, I can only mention its general guidelines. On my reading, Spinoza's system relies on a descriptive metaphysics that is largely in line with

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<sup>15</sup> See also Samuel NEWLANDS, *Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Perfection*, in Yitzhak J. MELAMED (ed.), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, pp. 266-285., for a similar view on Spinoza's metaphysics of perfection.

<sup>16</sup> Ursula RENZ, *The Explainability of Experience. Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

our ordinary way of describing things. I thus take it that objects of Spinoza's metaphysics are the same things we encounter in ordinary life, and if these are described as modes of God, this is to underline their constitutive interrelatedness and not to undermine their existence as individuals. Likewise, I contend that Spinoza's metaphysics has room for the existence of finite minds and their subjective experience which allows him to take the standpoint of humans seriously, without therefore turning all entities into mind-dependent objects. On top of this descriptive, realistically minded metaphysics, Spinoza is committed to the PSR; on my reconstruction, he assumes reality and real beings to be intelligible, i.e. that they can be explained, provided we have through science and analysis acquired the concepts that allow us to account for their being. However, unlike other readings that also ascribe to Spinoza a commitment to the PSR,<sup>17</sup> I do not think Spinoza used the PSR as a reduction principle which would require an ontological reduction of explained objects to their explanatory ground. I deny that Spinoza's commitment to the PSR is meant to overrule our initial and robust sense of being which was his initial point of departure.

This last specification is crucial. Why so? Recall that the existential lesson I took Spinoza's philosophy to provide us with rests on the notion of the ultimate positivity of being: Spinoza's response to our quest for meaningfulness rests on a radically anti-nihilist attitude, on which being as being – in other words, all unimpeded, straight, non-mutilated being – is good just in virtue of its being. Granting this, it is hard to see how a reductive, idealist rationalism that leaves us with an impoverished spectrum of beings, can square with this view.<sup>18</sup>

The question remains how, as human subjects, we can learn the lesson Spinozism has to offer. How do we come to know that being is good, i.e. how do we get a firm grasp of the inherent valuableness of being? The answer, in a nutshell, is this: as human subjects, or, more broadly speaking, finite embodied minds, we are already acquainted with being including its valuableness, but our having such acquaintance does not preclude the possibility of our being deprived of it. Unfortunately, as a matter of fact, people can be estranged from their initial acquaintance with the valuableness of being. Thus, it is key to pay attention to what we know just by being what we are, and to form a reflexive understanding of this knowledge that prevents us from losing it.

Let us now take a closer look at this. As humans we are confronted time and again with being. This is what happens when we are subject to some affection: we experience

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<sup>17</sup> Michael DELLA ROCCA, *Spinoza*, Routledge, London and New York 2008.

<sup>18</sup> See also Samuel NEWLANDS, *Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Perfection*, in Yitzhak J. MELAMED (ed.), *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 275. for a similar critique.

our own bodies, whereas we also experience the bodies of others, and since experiencing is a mental and reflective process, we also experience that we experience our own and external being. Thus, we know by any experience that we are and that being reaches out to other items. But how do we know that being is valuable? Well, experience is no isolated happening. It comes in bundles and series comprising more or less experiencing and thus provide us with more or less being. Now, as being is (what we might not have noticed yet) inherently good, more being is better than less, and as time goes on, we come to have a comparative, yet still immediate sense of this by the experience of the difference between less and more being. When the being provided is getting less, we feel sadness, when it is getting more and richer, we improve joy. Hence, we know of being and its valuableness by our very own experiential way of being.

But as humans we are not just experiencing subjects, i.e. our epistemic access to the world is not restricted to the notions immediately expressed in our experience. We can also reflect on the latter in a more-or-less deliberate manner, and if we do so in the right way, we will see that our experience provides us with a well-grounded knowledge of the most fundamental features of nature to which features being undoubtably belongs. In Spinoza's terminology: we have an idea of any actually existing body or singular thing, and, by the same token, true and necessary knowledge of God's essence.

Hence, we know what being is, we know how valuable it is, and we know that we do so. We only have to develop the right concepts to describe this knowledge properly. And this is important, as it may happen that our experiential access is blocked for contingent reasons, in which case our initial robust sense of being becomes frustrated. Likewise, we can be alienated from our own being, e.g. when our primary self-relation is irritated or distorted by the focus on fetishes and the identification with idols. Then, it may seem as if all the originally lively felt being vanishes, in which case we get sad, or, in modern terms: depressive. By contrast, having or developing the right concepts by which we may describe what we know, when we feel, in a manner that also fosters our sense of being – that is Spinoza's anti-depressive medicine.

This is how, on my view, Spinozism responds to our existential quests. It is a lesson in awareness of the inherent valuableness of being, of life.

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