



# Spinoza's Metaphysics

## SUBSTANCE AND THOUGHT



YITZHAK Y. MELAMED

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## Review

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## About the Author

Yitzhak Y. Melamed is a Professor in the Philosophy Department at Johns Hopkins University. He works on Early Modern Philosophy, German Idealism, and some issues in contemporary metaphysics (time,

mereology, and trope theory). Recently he won the ACLS Burkhardt (2011), NEH (2010), and Humboldt (2011) fellowships for his next major book project: *Spinoza and German Idealism: A Metaphysical Dialogue*.

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# **SPINOZA'S METAPHYSICS: SUBSTANCE AND THOUGHT BY YITZHAK Y. MELAMED PDF**

Yitzhak Melamed here offers a new and systematic interpretation of the core of Spinoza's metaphysics. In the first part of the book, he proposes a new reading of the metaphysics of substance in Spinoza: he argues that for Spinoza modes both inhere in and are predicated of God. Using extensive textual evidence, he shows that Spinoza considered modes to be God's propria. He goes on to clarify Spinoza's understanding of infinity, mereological relations, infinite modes, and the flow of finite things from God's essence. In the second part of the book, Melamed relies on this interpretation of the substance-mode relation and the nature of infinite modes and puts forward two interrelated theses about the structure of the attribute of Thought and its overarching role in Spinoza's metaphysics. First, he shows that Spinoza had not one, but two independent doctrines of parallelism. Then, in his final main thesis, Melamed argues that, for Spinoza, ideas have a multifaceted (in fact, infinitely faceted) structure that allows one and the same idea to represent the infinitely many modes which are parallel to it in the infinitely many attributes. Thought turns out to be coextensive with the whole of nature. Spinoza cannot embrace an idealist reduction of Extension to Thought because of his commitment to the conceptual separation of the attributes. Yet, within Spinoza's metaphysics, Thought clearly has primacy over the other attributes insofar as it is the only attribute which is as elaborate, as complex, and, in some senses, as powerful as God.

- Sales Rank: #2576265 in Books
- Published on: 2013-08-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.30" h x 1.00" w x 9.40" l, 1.19 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 264 pages

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A New Study of Spinoza on Thought and Being

By Robin Friedman

It is all too easy with a book one has revered for a long time to forget the difficulties of understanding. This difficulty is particularly the case with a notoriously complex work such as the Ethics of Spinoza. Yitzhak Melamed's ambitious recent book, "Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought" (2013) offers an insightful but bristlingly difficult analysis of perhaps the two key concepts of Spinoza's metaphysics. The work consists primarily of an analysis of the first two books of the Ethics, on God and on mind. Melamed also draws heavily on Spinoza's correspondence and to a lesser degree on his earlier writings. Melamed is a Professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. He earned his doctorate at Yale under the supervision of Spinoza scholar, Michael Della Rocca. Throughout his book, Melamed engages with his mentor, sometimes agreeing and often disagreeing.

Contemporary analytical philosophy tends to be highly suspicious of metaphysical philosophizing about the nature of reality. Much of this anti-metaphysical approach has impacted the manner in which philosophers approach Spinoza. The most immediately striking feature of Melamed's book is its overtly metaphysical character. Melamed, probably rightly, sees Spinoza as a rationalistic thinker practicing metaphysics as a means to understand reality in a grand style. Melamed takes Spinoza seriously in this attempt and tries to reject ways, such as the 'principle of charitable interpretation' in softening Spinoza the metaphysician. Melamed appears to have a great deal of sympathy for and understanding of metaphysical philosophy himself. His discussion is textually and philosophically informed. But Melamed is not at all hesitant in filling in apparent gaps in Spinoza's text and in offering what he sees are in part speculative readings in interpretation.

Melamed views the benefit of studying a difficult thinker such as Spinoza not in seeing how he is like us but precisely in seeing how he is different and, perhaps, learning from the difference. In one of several explanations of this approach, Melamed writes:

"Spinoza's philosophy is bold and rich in challenges to our 'commonsense intuitions,'" and insofar as it provides powerful arguments to motivate these challenges, I believe that we cannot ask for more. Bold and well-argued philosophy has the indispensable virtue of being able to unsettle and try us, to move us to reconsider what seems natural and obvious, and possibly even to change our most basic beliefs. Indeed, for those who seek to test- rather than secure and confirm -- their old and well-fortified intuitions, Spinoza is

nothing short of a living spring."

Melamed considers Spinoza sympathetically, boldly, and creatively in both parts of his book on Spinoza's metaphysics of substance and Spinoza's metaphysics of thought. In a brief introduction, Melamed introduces two metaphysical principles that pervade Spinoza's philosophy. The first, the principle of sufficient reason, (PSR), he adopts from Della Rocca's study of Spinoza while softening it substantially in the course of his study. The second principle is the priority of knowing the infinite over knowing the finite for Spinoza, a seemingly paradoxical but characteristic teaching of this thinker. Hence, Spinoza begins his philosophizing with God, the broadest possible subject, rather than with finite things.

The treatment of substance makes the longer of the two portions of Melamed's book. Broadly speaking, Melamed considers and rejects two frequent readings of Spinoza. The first, epitomized by Edwin Curley, takes much of the metaphysics out of Spinoza by reading him analytically and scientifically. Spinoza's substance is seen as a scientific principle or as an efficient cause. Melamed offers a number of strong textual reasons for rejecting this interpretation, but his philosophical reasoning is at least equally important. Melamed wants to find that Spinoza has something metaphysically important to present in his own right. Thus, Melamed develops and supports what once was a traditionally pantheistic understanding of Spinoza's thinking, and he defends this approach against objections early lodged against Spinoza and continuing to be pressed.

German idealists culminating in Hegel took an opposite approach to Spinoza and understood him as an "acosmic" thinker similar to the ancient Greek philosopher, Parmenides. This approach sees Spinoza as denying the existence of the finite world and holding only the absolute, or substance, is real. Here again, Melamed finds persuasive textual and philosophical reasons for rejecting this approach, although he finds this reading possesses a certain appeal. Spinoza becomes a difficult and fascinating thinker in his effort to have both absolute substance and a world of finite particulars. Melamed works to weave the strands together in his analysis. He does so in part through a discussion of modes, especially infinite modes, in Spinoza's Ethics. Melamed finds that most students of Spinoza have insufficiently understood the role of modes in their understanding of substance.

Melamed regards the second part of his study, on the mind, as breaking more new ground than the first part. One of Spinoza's most important teachings is proposition 7 of Book 2 of the Ethics: "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" and its attendant demonstration and scholium. This proposition ordinarily is taken to urge a parallelism between mind and body. Melamed tries to read the proposition and its support as developing two distinct doctrines of parallelism neither of which reduce to the other. The ultimate goal is to develop the nature and primacy of thought in Spinoza's philosophy. The discussion soon grows thorny and brings in Spinoza's teachings of the "infinitely many attributes" unknown to the human mind. Broadly, for Melamed, thought includes all the attributes as well as substance itself in a way the other attributes do not. He thus finds thought primary in Spinoza's scheme of things. Importantly again, Melamed resists a reduction of Spinoza to philosophical idealism because, Melamed finds, Spinoza insists throughout on the independent reality of objects and of the attribute of extension.

The result of this challenging study and analysis is, to simplify, a reading of Spinoza that tends more towards the mystic, idealistic-leaning elements of this thought than to hard-headedness. Readers of the Ethics fall in general somewhere between these two poles. In a summary at the end of his book, Melamed describes Spinoza as a substantial monist and an attributes pluralist who also teaches a unique form of dualism. The dualism is not the traditional philosophical mind-body dualism but a dualist between thought (broader than mind) and being. Melamed concludes:



"Spinoza is neither a materialist nor a reductive idealist, and even the 'double-aspect theorist' label would not fit him. His view is one that grants clear preeminence to thought without adopting reductive idealism. Here perhaps lies Spinoza's real philosophical genius (i.e. in the fact that he forces us to suspend our traditional ways of addressing the issue, and makes us consider it anew from a not-so-familiar perspective.")

I learned a great deal from thinking about Spinoza again with Melamed. I appreciated, even though I am not sure I share, his unapologetically metaphysical approach. This is a detailed study which will be unsuitable for readers with little background and only a casual interest in Spinoza. Readers wanting to engage seriously with Spinoza's thought will find Melamed's book valuable.

Robin Friedman

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