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The young Spinoza: a metaphysician in the making

Andrea Sangiacomo

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Katherin Rogers's interest in bringing Anselm's account of free will to the attention of contemporary philosophers is an excellent one and is well worth realizing. While I do not believe that her particular interpretation succeeds in accurately capturing what's best in Anselm's work, further pursuing the project can bring some truly illuminating insight to the discussion.

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The young Spinoza: a metaphysician in the making, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Oxford and New York, OUP, 2015, 378 pp., £64.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-0-19-997166-4

The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making offers the first extensive collection of essays in English entirely devoted to Spinoza's early works. The book is composed of twenty essays, and it provides a refreshing approach to the philosophy of the young Spinoza (i.e. before the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670). The fact that Spinoza's thought evolved over time has been a matter of discussion in continental Europe since the pioneering works of Alexandre Matheron ('Pourquoi le *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* est-il resté inachevé?', *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 71/1987: 45–53), Bernard Rousset ('Éléments et hypothèses pour une analyse des rédactions successives de *Ethique IV*', *Cahiers Spinoza* 5/1984, 129–45), and Filippo Mignini ('Données et problèmes de la chronologie spinozienne jusqu'en 1665', *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 71/1: 9–21) among others. Yet, the general tendency of Spinoza scholarship is still to consider the early writings from the perspective of the *Ethics*, and use them as materials to provide further clarifications of the claims addressed in Spinoza's masterpiece. Yitzhak Melamed, the editor of the volume, makes very clear from the beginning that this collection is inspired by a very different approach. As Melamed explains:

[T]he value of Spinoza's early works is not at all limited to their being stations on the road leading to the *Ethics*. A teleological attitude of such a sort would celebrate the works of the 'mature Spinoza' at the expense of the early works. However, we have no reason to assume that on all issues the views of the *Ethics* are better argued, developed, and motivated than those of the early works. In other words, we should keep our minds open to the possibility that on some issues the early works might contain better analyses and argumentation than the *Ethics*. (2)

This methodological assumption is implemented by the twenty chapters that compose the book. In Chapter 1, Curley investigates what could have been the content of the legendary 'Apology' that Spinoza would have written after his excommunication. Chapters 2–6 are instead devoted to Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (arguably composed around 1658). Mignini (Chapter 2) provides further support for his claim about the chronological anteriority of the TIE in respect to the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics*. Nelson (Chapter 3) examines Spinoza's account of the Supreme Good in the TIE, while Morrison (Chapter 4) his account of truth. LeBuffe (Chapter 5) draws attention to Spinoza's 'provisional moral code' introduced in the first part of the TIE. Laerke (Chapter 6) studies Leibniz's reaction to Spinoza's TIE.

The subsequent five chapters concentrate on the most systematic presentation of Spinoza's early philosophy, the *Short Treatise* (arguably completed in 1661). Garber (Chapter 7) investigates Spinoza's Cartesian attitude about the issue of mind–body distinction, while Marshall (Chapter 8) focuses on Spinoza's account of reason. Leo (Chapter 9) questions what motivates Spinoza's use and recapitulation of Calvinist theological language. Carriero (Chapter 10) focuses on Spinoza's account of 'will' as a 'being of reason' (KV2, 16). Viljanen (Chapter 11) reconstructs Spinoza's essentialism in the *Short Treatise* and points out important conceptual tensions entailed by it concerning the extent to which finite things can be considered to be properly active. Connected to this topic are Renz's (Chapter 18) examination of Spinoza's claim in the *Short Treatise* to the effect that the intellect would be purely 'passive', and Brandau's (Chapter 19) discussion of Spinoza's account of *degrees* of essence.

A third group of chapters focuses on Spinoza's *Metaphysical Thoughts*, published in appendix to Spinoza's *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (1663). Manzini (Chapter 12) considers how Spinoza's completion of the *Principles* also marks his decision to abandon rather than reform Cartesianism. Schmaltz (Chapter 13) examines Spinoza's account of eternity (considering also the famous letter 12 'On the Infinite'). Hübner (Chapter 14) focuses on Spinoza's account of negation against the background of the Idealist critique of 'acosmism'.

A fourth group of chapters addresses Spinoza's treatment of metaphysical topics across his early writings. Schechter (Chapter 15) draws attention to the significant differences between the *Treatise on the Emendation* and the *Short Treatise* in Spinoza's doctrine of the 'kinds of knowledge'. Newland (Chapter 16) draws attention to Spinoza's critique of abstract thinking. Melamed (Chapter 17) discusses the evolution of Spinoza's account of 'substance' and 'attributes' and the conceptual tensions embedded by his fundamental metaphysical commitments. A final chapter by Totaro (Chapter 20) provides a detailed account of the recently discovered manuscript of the *Ethics* found in the Vatican Archives and of its discrepancy with the published text of the *Ethics*.

The Young Spinoza is a remarkably rich collection of essays that will remain a landmark for future Spinoza scholarship. Although the collection does not aim to be exhaustive in covering all the aspects of Spinoza's thought, it surely underscores the fecundity of Spinoza's early writings. While the focus of the volume remains for the most part devoted to metaphysical themes, Spinoza's *ethical* commitments

should be worth exploring as well. In fact, both the *Treatise on the Emendation* and the *Short Treatise* are aimed primarily at outlining an account of the Supreme Good and drawing a path towards beatitude. Also, in his early correspondence (especially with van Blijenbergh in 1664–65), Spinoza extensively discusses the nature of Good and Evil and the problem of moral responsibility. All these aspects still need further exploration, especially if one follows Melamed's methodological advice not to consider Spinoza's early writings as necessarily anticipating the views that will emerge in the *Ethics*. A thorough consideration of the 'early' Spinoza should also, however, take into fuller consideration his correspondence, which receives less attention in this collection. Although Spinoza's 'Letter on the Infinite' (Letter 12) and his exchange with Robert Boyle (Letters 6–13) about the nature of scientific experiments have been the subject of some debate, many other parts of the correspondence provide further insight into Spinoza's views and in their development. Hopefully, the significant step accomplished by *The Young Spinoza* in terms of scholarship will stimulate further research on the challenging and sometimes puzzling domain of Spinoza's early writings.

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The poverty of conceptual truth: Kant's analytic/synthetic distinction and the limits of metaphysics, by R. Lanier Anderson, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, 384 pp., £50.00 (hb.), ISBN: 978-0-19872457-5

In his winning submission for the 1763 Berlin Academy prize essay competition, Moses Mendelssohn explained how necessary truths are grasped. All such propositions, in both mathematics and metaphysics, are really just explications of conceptual truths. We require a special method – a conceptual 'unpacking' called analysis – that easily reveals the deep nature of things through consideration of concepts alone. Mendelssohn draws on the metaphor of vision in order to explain how such truths are grasped, saying that 'the analysis of concepts is for the understanding nothing more than what the magnifying glass is for sight. It does not produce anything that was not to be found in the object' (*Philosophical Writings*, ed. Dahlstrom, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 285). Mendelssohn's claims reflected what he took to be an established Leibnizian/Wolffian orthodoxy regarding both the metaphysical basis of necessary truths as well as the epistemology involved in grasping them.