

Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith, eds.

The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation.

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This volume opens with a brief, but powerful essay by the editors—really a manifesto, and a very welcome one. The aim of the volume, as stated in this essay, is to recognize and advance developments in our understanding of the ways in which the study of the history of philosophy can be pursued. For many years, especially in the Anglo-American world, historical figures in philosophy would be mined for whatever insights they could provide into our contemporary philosophical problems. This endeavor was often seen as something of a salvage operation, a kind of rescue mission, carried out with little regard for the historical context in which the philosophers worked, with little regard for the range of philosophical issues which the philosophers took up, with little regard for the lesser philosophers with whom our favored philosophers may have interacted, and with little regard for other, non-philosophical activities our philosophers may have engaged in. My impression is that these limitations of historical methodology are more pronounced in the study of early modern philosophy than in other areas of historical study. Perhaps this is because the greater temporal proximity we have to early modern philosophy than to ancient and medieval philosophers has led us to be unwarrantedly confident in our ability to understand Descartes and his successors. Nevertheless, a gap of (in many cases) more than 300 years is a large gap indeed, one during which all sorts of opportunities for misunderstanding may arise.

As the editors acknowledge, steps have been taken of late to explore more contextual, more varied approaches to philosophy in the early modern period and in particular to that strand in early modern philosophy known as rationalism. New readings in this spirit have been provided for individual rationalists, “but the movement as a whole has yet to be treated in keeping with the recent turn in history-of-philosophy scholarship toward greater sensitivity for historical contexts and toward considering the full range of intellectual concerns of past thinkers in order to understand their philosophical projects” (3). Helping to fill this gap is the reason for this volume on the rationalists.

One theme that emerges from the volume is that a broader approach to the rationalists reveals that they have much in common with apparently non-rationalist philosophers. Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz are all very much empirically-minded philosophers; in the same way so-called empiricists such as Hume have a surprising affinity for apparently rationalist lines of thought. A result of such scholarly approaches, confirmed by this volume, is that the label “rationalists” increasingly appears to be misleading. So—paradoxically, perhaps—the volume will, insofar as it is successful, render its title obsolete or will at least lead us to see that it should be adorned with scare quotes.

As the editors note, not all the essays in the volume are on the more contextual side of the spectrum. The editors are not dogmatic: these methodological matters are, of course, matters of degree, and a crucial thing for historians of philosophy is to be open to and to learn from more

approaches than the approach associated with one's own inevitably narrow expertise in philosophy. The conviction of the editors and of many, if not all, of the contributors to this volume is that the history of philosophy is worthy of study in its own right. At the same time, by expanding one's methodological horizons, we have the prospect of lifting philosophy itself from a potentially stultifying narrowness. Such are the ambitions that inform this volume.

Among the many strong essays in the volume, the one that perhaps best embodies the aim of showing how a thinker's philosophy is illuminated by considering other allied field is Alison Laywine's, "Music, Mechanics and 'Mixed Mathematics'". Laywine presents in fascinating detail a dispute about the nature of music theory in the 16th and 17th centuries, a dispute about whether and how music theory should be governed by empirical or by a priori considerations. A key player in this debate was Vincenzo Galilei, father of Galileo. Laywine makes a strong case, drawing on and advancing the work of Stillman Drake, that Galileo's program for seeing mechanics as a branch of mixed mathematics that straddles the a priori and the empirical was influenced by the mixed approach of Galileo's father and others to music theory. The most striking aspect of this striking essay is that it turns out that Vincenzo's research program in music theory was in many ways a carrying out of Ptolemy's research program in music which, in turn, was of a piece with Ptolemy's research program in the theory of heavenly motions. The surprising upshot is that, through this "detour" into music theory and Galileo's context, one is led to overturn the prevailing and superficial impression of Galileo as thoroughly anti-Ptolemaic. It turns out, according to Laywine, that it now "seems very natural to read the discussion of accelerated motion in Day Three of [Galileo's] *Discourses* as a novel implementation of the Ptolemaic research program—not in music theory this time, but in the newly emerging science of mechanics" (63). It's good to see Ptolemy get some good publicity for a change!

In keeping with the aim of attending to lesser studied aspects of the thought of individual rationalists, the volume includes two essays devoted to Descartes' ethical thought. One of these, Lisa Shapiro's paper, "Descartes on Human Nature and the Human Good", explores the difficulties that Descartes' dualism poses for attributing any kind of eudaimonism to Descartes. Because of the bifurcated character of human nature, Descartes—Shapiro argues—does not think that virtue, understood as the realization of the highest human good, requires our perfecting our nature. Shapiro concludes that Descartes "does not need to see our good as tied to our nature" (26), and thus Descartes is not a eudaimonist. This is provocative and promising, though the significance of this result is left somewhat unclear because of the vague definition of structural eudaimonism that Shapiro works with: structural eudaimonism is any view that ties human good to human nature. Even if Descartes does not think that our good requires our perfecting our nature, mightn't it still be the case that in some looser way the human good is tied to human nature?

The volume also contains essays that advance our understanding of central, but poorly understood themes in individual rationalists. Two papers on Spinoza stand out in this regard. Whereas most commentators—famously including Jonathan Bennett in his relatively a-historical masterpiece, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*—simply throw up their hands when it comes to trying to understand Spinoza's doctrine of intuitive knowledge or the so-called third kind of knowledge, Hasana Sharp in her essay, "'Nemo non videt': Intuitive Knowledge and the Question of Spinoza's Elitism", plunges forward without trepidation. She powerfully makes the case that, for

Spinoza, the third kind of knowledge is not reserved to a kind of philosophical elite; it is thus more in keeping with Spinoza's democratic political philosophy than it might initially seem. Further, Sharp presents the most vivid account with which I am acquainted of the affective power of intuitive knowledge. She reaches the general conclusion that "one of the greatest marks of distinction of Spinoza's rationalism is its emphasis upon power and capacity over the justification of belief" (117). The characterization of Spinoza's rationalism in terms of power is entirely apt and the connection of power to the third kind of knowledge is highly illuminating. I would question only the implicit separation of considerations having to do with epistemic justification from a concern with power. It might well be that, for Spinoza, all there is to epistemic justification is affectivity and power.

Yitzhak Melamed's paper, "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline", is a troubling and delightful gem. The paper is troubling because Melamed charts very convincingly the multifarious pressures that Spinoza's naturalism places on Spinoza to see human beings as nothing special. Melamed unflinchingly articulates what he rightly sees as the anti-ethical implications of Spinoza's rationalism. This essay provides an example of a leading scholar attempting to rethink an historical figure by coming to grips with a central commitment – in this case, naturalism – and subjecting it to an original and penetrating analysis.

Behind Spinoza's naturalism and, indeed, behind many of the most distinctive views of the so-called rationalists is the Principle of Sufficient Reason (the PSR), the principle according to which, in Leibniz's terms, "we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise" (*Monadology* §32). Despite the PSR's importance to philosophy in this period (and, I would argue, throughout the history of philosophy down to the present day), surprisingly little attention has been given to the justification of the PSR itself. More attention has been given to attempting (as in Hume and Kant) to undermine the PSR than to attempting to support it. An overall assessment of what the editors see as the rationalist movement cannot be carried out without an assessment of attempts to justify the PSR itself. I have attempted a general defense of the PSR in my paper, "PSR" (*Philosophers' Imprint* 2010), but this defense does not thoroughly engage with the history of defenses of the PSR. And this is part of the reason that Brandon C. Look's essay, "Grounding the Principle of Sufficient Reason: Leibnizian Rationalism and the Humean Challenge"—the closing paper in the volume—is so crucial to this collection. Although Look reaches no definitive conclusion on the prospects of the PSR, he does usefully chart the often sorry and always remarkable history of unsuccessful attempts to justify the PSR.

With the increasing historical insight into the rationalist tradition that scholars are attaining, this most welcome volume—filled with a number of other good essays that I do not have the space to comment on here—provides considerable reason to hope that we can build on the new insights that all of the authors in this volume achieve and arrive at a perspective from which we can better evaluate not only the PSR, but also rationalism itself.

Michael Della Rocca
Yale University