

**Michael Della Rocca (ed.).** *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*. Oxford University Press 2018. 687 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN).

Lessing's claim that the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza was 'a dead dog' (*ein toter Hund*) is well known. But there is no doubt that this extreme judgement does not do justice to the author of the *Ethics*. His thoroughgoing rationalism and his deep analysis of the passions are only a few aspects of the impressive richness of Spinoza's philosophy. Though in Anglo-American circles there has been a kind of deafness concerning Spinoza's philosophical system, there is now a steadily growing interest in Spinoza's work. *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza* is proof of this revival of interest. Obviously, Spinoza is important not only for his metaphysics, but also for his political philosophy, his philosophy of religion, and so on. In any case, all these aspects – as Della Rocca says in his introduction to the volume – have their 'underpinnings in Spinoza's rationalism and his demand for metaphysical explanation' (3). According to Della Rocca, one can find in Spinoza's philosophy two pillars that support his entire philosophical structure: his rationalism and his naturalism. The latter, as Della Rocca says, 'makes Spinoza especially attractive to empirically minded philosophers' (3). One of the main aims of this volume is to provide a detailed analysis of Spinoza's systematic thinking and the way it works in all areas of his thought. Another aim is to clarify the influences on Spinoza's thought, above all Descartes and Jewish philosophy prior to the seventeenth century.

The volume opens with an essay entitled 'The Virtues of Geometry,' by Aaron Garrett. The title of Spinoza's most famous work, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, might lead us to think that geometrical demonstration is synonymous with the true philosophical method. According to Garrett, it does not follow that Spinoza 'held that geometrical demonstration was a "method" in anything but a loose way of speaking. Spinoza sometimes referred to use of geometrical demonstrations as an "order" and sometimes as a "manner," but never directly as a "method"' (18). Garrett traces the distinction between 'order' and 'method' to the Scholastic textbooks on which Spinoza drew. The important consequence is that if 'geometrical demonstration is only an order or arrangement, then it might not be a method for securing new truths but a means to present truths acquired in some other manner' (19).

The next essay, 'From Maimonides to Spinoza: Three Versions of an Intellectual Transition,' is by Kenneth Seeskin. Seeskin explores the fraught relationship between Spinoza and Jewish philosophy. There is no doubt that Jewish philosophy deeply influenced Spinoza, especially if we turn our gaze to a philosopher like Maimonides. Seeskin says that even though Spinoza attacks Maimonides' conception of prophecy in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, both thinkers 'make a sharp distinction between the imagination and the intellect and criticize popular religion for its reliance on the former. Both maintain that the ultimate happiness of the human race consists in the perfection of the intellect. For both thinkers, the perfection of the intellect culminates in the intellectual love for God, which is to say a selfless love that overcomes the attachment to perishable things and looks at the world *sub specie aeternitatis*' (46).

As I have already said, one of the main aims of this volume is to clarify Spinoza's influences, and Descartes is foremost among them—especially in light of the title of Spinoza's first published work, *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II*. The link between the two philosophers is explored in Tad Schmaltz's essay 'Spinoza and Descartes.' As is well known, Descartes aimed to discover a firm foundation for philosophy, a foundation he located in 'the truth both of the necessary existence of God as infinite substance, and of the conceptual independence of mind and body' (63). This conceptual framework leads to a stark dualism because of its identification of the

body with an extended thing (*res extensa*), and of the mind with a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). Spinoza vehemently criticized this dualism by holding that, at the end of the day, there is only one substance, namely God. This is the starting point of the entire Spinozian metaphysical system. This issue is analyzed in the next essay, ‘The Building Blocks of Spinoza’s Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes, and Modes,’ by Yitzhak K. Y. Melamed.

Spinoza famously argued that there is no free will. Some scholars have interpreted this view as a strong necessitarianism. Charlie Huenemann, in his essay ‘But Why was Spinoza a Necessitarian?’, tries to answer this question by arguing that Spinoza’s causal determinism should not be confused with necessitarianism. He explains the difference in the following way: ‘A causal determinist says that every event is made necessary by its causes. But the causal determinist does not go so far as to say nothing could be otherwise, since it remains true that *if* the causes had been somehow different, then the effects would have been different. A necessitarian takes this last step, maintaining that the causes could not have been otherwise, and so absolutely, nothing could be otherwise. There is some reason for thinking that Spinoza was at most a causal determinist’ (115). This issue is closely linked to the topic of explanation. Spinoza’s rationalist metaphysics holds that everything has an explanation—which would seem to be a version of the principle of sufficient reason. Martin Lin examines this issue in his essay ‘The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza,’ which also compares Spinoza’s view of this principle with Leibniz’s. Lin argues that there are not significant differences between Spinoza and Leibniz on this topic, except for one: while Leibniz maintains that the principle of sufficient reason applies to both truths of fact (contingencies) and truths of reason, Spinoza denies that there are contingencies.

The next essay, Eric Schliesser’s ‘Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being,’ deals with Spinoza’s method for inquiring into nature. In a letter to Simon De Vries, Spinoza ‘offers a sharp distinction between two domains of inquiry: (i) empirical inquiry is necessary when we are dealing with beings whose existence cannot be derived from their definitions; and (ii) empirical enquiry is pointless when we are dealing with beings whose existence cannot be distinguished from their essence’ (161). Even though Spinoza’s claims might seem to be a manifestation of the inductive method, his position is actually more sophisticated. Schliesser identifies six aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy of nature: ‘(i) Spinoza does not use empirical knowledge as a touchstone for true, rational knowledge, rather, in the manner of Descartes, intellectual conception is a constraint on how deliverances of the senses can be interpreted ... (ii) Spinoza associates empirical evidence with the imagination, that is, the first kind of knowledge. (iii) Spinoza’s tendency to associate empirical evidence with imagination offers some evidence for his reservations about empirical evidence ... (iv) Spinoza is quite adamant that we should not read the *Ethics* as providing foundations for a mechanics ... (v) Spinoza doubts that we can ever know true causes in nature; (vi) Spinoza repeatedly claims that we are ignorant of nature ..., and given that we need to know everything to know anything there are good grounds to treat Spinoza as a skeptic about empirical knowledge of nature’ (166-167).

The remaining essays in this volume deal with a wide range of topics, from Spinoza’s account of error, to his metaphysics of the will, to his complex relationships to Leibniz, Hume, and Hegel. Taken as a whole, the book demonstrates the renewed interest in Spinoza’s philosophical system. It shows as well the great richness of the Dutch thinker who, even today, still has something to say.

**Giacomo Borbone**, University of Catania