

Abstract: **The reality of finite things & the principle of sufficient reason in Spinoza's philosophy.**

The question this paper aims to answer is twofold: *first*, according to Spinoza, are finite things real? Or is it the case that there is ultimately only one thing: the eternal, undifferentiated Substance, or God? There is a long tradition of thinkers who believe Spinoza embraces precisely this kind “monism”: this interpretation of Spinoza was favored in particular by German and British Idealists. If (as this paper argues) finite things *are* real, a *second* question poses itself: *why* are there finite things? For, according to Spinoza's version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, not only are all things in Nature necessary, but in each case there must exist a “reason or cause” why any particular thing exists (or doesn't). So if finite things are real, Spinoza must have an account of why God necessarily gives rise to finite things. One way to view this problem is to see it as an inquiry into Spinoza's answer to a question that has long perplexed philosophers: why does God – an infinite and perfect being – create anything? So the problem of the reality of finite things is not just a matter of settling a fundamental interpretative issue in Spinoza's metaphysics, but also a matter of situating Spinoza in relation to one of the perennial questions in the history of philosophy.

Moreover, monistic readings of Spinoza's philosophy, despite their ultimate failure, do latch onto obscure but critical aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics, and are well grounded in doctrines Spinoza *does* hold. So attending to the questions they pose helps us shed light on important aspects of Spinoza's metaphysics (such as his notion of “essence”). We should also not overlook the repercussions that the question of reality of finite beings has for Spinoza's *moral* philosophy. For from the perspective of moral philosophy, the problematic status of finite things can be expressed as follows: can there even *be* the kinds of individuals who could experience the demand of virtue, or of a moral law? If not, in what sense can Spinoza offer any moral philosophy?

The paper shows the failure of monistic interpretations to make their case (inter alia, it shows why arguments from *divine immutability*, *contradictory properties*, and *imagination* fail), and gives *textual* and *doctrinal* reasons to think that finite individuals, constituted qua finite through “negation” (a concept the paper explores in detail), *do* have metaphysical reality. However, Spinoza's finite individuals are *not* isomorphic with individuals as we ordinarily conceive them. For, as the paper shows by analyzing Spinoza's notion of “privation”, for Spinoza, many key aspects of finite individuals as we ordinarily understand and experience them – most importantly, our emotions and our normative ideas – do not in fact have any metaphysical reality: strictly speaking, they do not exist. This requires us, the paper argues, to reconceive fundamentally how we understand Spinoza's moral philosophy.

The paper also shows that Spinoza's metaphysics contains a good reason for the existence of *infinite* modes (in particular, for the necessity of the infinite intellect), and so for *some* modal self-differentiation of substance. However, the paper argues that Spinoza *fails* to give a reason for God's causation of *finite* things, and so fails to adhere to his own principle of sufficient reason.