



A Vindication

Wim Klever

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Comparing Hume with Spinoza I am accused of having misread both, at least in certain respects; I would have gone too far in considering Spinoza as an influential root of Hume's thought. On occasion of Dr. Leavitt's criticism I would like to stress the following points:

1. In spite of Wolfson's endeavour to reduce Spinoza to Aristotelian, scholastic and Jewish sources of the Middle Ages, many texts—in fact all texts in which Aristotle is mentioned—constitute a convincing proof that Spinoza not only rejected, just like Hume, all sorts of Aristotelian and scholastic speculation, but even showed much contempt for them.¹ In the same way there cannot be any doubt that he rejected Maimonides' Jewish Aristotelianism.² In the *TTP* he defines his position in sharp contrast to Maimonides.

2. *Nominalism* means that names may be used for the indication of many items whereas ideas are essentially ideas of particulars. According to Spinoza everything is reflected in its own specific idea,³ whereas names like 'ens', 'aliquid', 'man', etc. may be the sign, sometimes ambiguously but often also without confusion, of more things, which are vaguely conceived. This confused idea, then, is nevertheless the proper idea of a particular blurred image in the brains. Some eminent scholars like Stuart Hampshire and Martial Gueroult (I confess: not all of them) pretend that Spinoza is a true nominalist. I think the texts (and the whole structure of the system) enforce us to confess that they are right.

3. In the case of common things, that is, (elementary) things common to all beings, the human body included, the ideas of these things are, though particular, common too.⁴ In spite of and in line with Hume's agreement with Spinoza's nominalism he does not deny, as Leavitt pretends, the existence of common notions. In "Of the Passions," part 1, section 10, he writes that "according to *common notions* a man has no power, where very considerable motives lie betwixt him and the satisfaction of his desires, and determine him to forbear what he wishes to perform."⁵ This passage is not at all in conflict with *Treatise* 1.1.7 in which the real existence of abstract ideas in our mind is refuted. The ideas of things we have in common with other natural beings, may not be called abstract for that reason. This section (T 17-25) is perfectly congruous with Spinoza's position.

4. I keep to my claim that there is a *striking parallel* between Spinoza's famous distinction between three kinds of knowledge

(2 *Ethics* 40s2) and some statements of Hume. Additional evidence for this claim (compared with what I gave already) is to find in *Treatise* 1.3.11, where Hume marks "several degrees of evidence, ... *distinguish[ing] human reason into three kinds, viz. that from knowledge, from proofs, and from probabilities*" (T 124, first emphasis added); and in the *Enquiry*, where all objects of human reason are divided into three (!) kinds as well, namely "*Relations of Ideas ... either intuitively or demonstratively certain*" and "*Matters of Fact.*"⁶ Put into a diagram the resemblance becomes even more apparent:

Spinoza <i>Ethics</i> opinio/imaginatio ratio intuitio		Hume <i>Treatise</i> probability proof knowledge		<i>Enquiry</i> Matters of Fact demonstratively intuitively
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Careful comparison of the texts shows that the functions attributed to the various kinds of knowledge are exactly the same in Spinoza as in Hume, contrary to what is suggested by Leavitt. I only need to remind him of the 'Spinozistic' opening of *Treatise* 1.3.3: "Tis a general maxim in philosophy, that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence ... Tis suppos'd to be founded on intuition, ... All certainty arises from the comparison of ideas, and from the discovery of such relations as are unalterable*" (T 78-79). Both philosophers locate the highest kind of knowledge in the evidence of mathematics and the common properties of nature, explained in physics. Let us not forget that both are fully naturalists, for whom the understanding of things "sub specie aeternitatis" (Spinoza's description of the third kind of knowledge) means in fact the intuition of the particular essence of things in a scientific way.

5. In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* it is certainly not Spinoza's intention to show that the third kind of knowledge is identical with prophecy. On the contrary, in the first two chapters he clearly demonstrates, in his scientific hermeneutics, that prophecy is the lowest kind of knowledge, the imagination.⁷

6. Leavitt accuses Hume of obscurity on account of his not following an Aristotelian distinction between logical and physical causality. Although I did not touch in my article this question I would like to remark that Hume denies neither the first nor the second type of necessity and that, therefore, the obscurity is wholly on the side of Leavitt. According to Hume there is certainly logical necessity in our scientific demonstrations, that is, in the relations of ideas we arrive at in mathematics and physics; and those relations are at the same time mental acknowledgements of what there is: "Whatever we conceive, we

conceive to be existent" (T 67). We cannot think that everything must necessarily have a cause and at the same time doubt whether it is like that. Quite another question is whether we are able to establish causal relationships in matters of fact and to determine, for instance, with absolute certainty that *A* is the cause of *B*. This is never possible, according to Hume *and* according to Spinoza. We can never learn anything definitive about concrete causal relationships from experience.⁸ Custom (Hume) or "consuetudo" (Spinoza) bring us not farther than probability or imagination.

7. Leavitt seems to maintain that Hume would not have subscribed Spinoza's 1 *Ethics* a4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause." But I must confess that I find nowhere in Hume's work a negation of this axiom! The two phrases quoted by Leavitt in support of his opinion, simply state other things; they only stress the impossibility of ascertaining a causal relationship on the basis of experience. That is not what is said in Spinoza's axiom, let alone its opposite. That, on the contrary, Hume was fully convinced of the truth of Spinoza's axiom, becomes apparent in his practice, for instance his treatise on the passions, in which he intends to "explain (!) those violent emotions or passions, their nature, origin, *causes*, and effects" (T 276, emphasis added). Hundreds of places could be quoted in favour of his giving (and claiming the right to do so) causal explanations, by means of reasoning from general properties of things and of human beings. If this is not an argument for his adherence to Spinoza's axiom, I must conclude that I cannot read.

8. According to Leavitt, "Hume did the most to bring about the acceptance of the modern view of causality as an external relationship reducible to constant conjunction." I can't help to contest that this was his intention. Hume never reduces causality to a constant conjunction, that is, to its absence from the physical or mental world. Neither may this fictitious denial be considered the 'modern view' of causality. Leavitt is one of those readers who obscures Hume's position by forgetting that he was only critical, like all true scientists, in assuming real causal relationships on the basis of 'impressions'. In this sense and in this sense alone Hume is, together with Spinoza, a philosopher of the modern age.

Erasmus University of Rotterdam

The following abbreviations are used for references to Spinoza's works within the text and notes: *Ep*: *Epistolae*; *Ethics*: *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*; *KV*: *Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*; *TTP*: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The

following abbreviations are used when reference is made to the *Ethics*:
a: axiom; s: scholium.

1. See, for instance, *KV* 1.6; *CM* 1.1.8: "A. gravissime erravit"; *CM* 2.5.3: "Peripateticorum farraginem"; *CM* 2.6.1: "finxerunt"; *TTP* praef.: "cum Graecis insanire"; *Ep* 13: "doctrinam illam nugatoriam"; *Ep* 56: "non multum apud me auctoritas ... Aristotelis ... valet."
2. See 7 *TTP* 87: "Maimonidae sententiam ut noxiam, inutilem et absurdam explodimus"; 15 *TTP* 4: "errorem Maimonidis"; and *Ep* 43.
3. *KV* 1.6.7: "this objection arises from ignorance ... that men have formed universal ideas; ... they are nothing"; *KV* 1.10.3: "things must agree with their particular Ideas"; 2 *Ethics* 3; 2 *Ethics* 7 with corollarium; and especially 2 *Ethics* 12: "Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind [that is, in the body] must be perceived by the human mind."
4. See, for Spinoza, 2 *Ethics* 37-39.
5. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1987), 312, emphasis added (hereafter cited as "T"). Compare this with "the laws of matter and motion, that determine a sapling to destroy the oak, from which it sprung" (T 467, emphasis added). These fundamental laws of physics are referred to by both Spinoza and Hume when they speak about 'common notions'.
6. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 25.
7. Cf. 1 *TTP* 43: "Possumus iam igitur sine scrupulo affirmare, prophetas non nisi ope imaginationis Dei revelata percepisse," and 2 *TTP* 3: "prophetias variavisse, non tantum pro ratione imaginationis et temperamentı corporis cuiusque prophetae, sed etiam pro ratione opinıonum quibus fuerant imbuti, atque adeo prophetiam numquam prophetas doctiores reddidisse."
8. See *Ep* 9: "Nam experientia nullas rerum essentias docet," and *Ep* 6, in which Spinoza opposed Boyle who thought to have experimentally proven a causal relationship concerning the essence of saltpetre: "Numquam chymicis neque aliis experimentis nisi demonstratione et computatione aliquis id comprobare poterit." The ideas of the affections of our body must always remain inadequate and confused (2 *Ethics* 38).