

A proper concept? – Revisiting Spinoza's usage of '*propria*'

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One of the well-known tensions within Baruch de Spinoza's philosophy arises from his apparent commitment to both necessitarianism and essentialism. While Spinoza defends the view that nothing can be otherwise, he also believes in the strong explanatory role of essences. As scholars have argued, this raises a significant concern (Bennett, 1984, p. 114): If everything is necessary, then all properties must also be necessary, as well. Yet, if all properties are necessary, all properties seem to qualify as essential properties because a property is considered essential to something if it necessarily belongs to it. However, if all properties are essential, how can essences provide informative explanations?

Over the past thirty years, many interpreters have argued that the Aristotelian distinction between 'essential properties' and '*propria*' – properties that are unique and necessary but non-essential – offers a solution to this tension in Spinoza's texts (Garrett, 2018, p. 107). According to this interpretation, essences can ground informative explanations because those explanations refer to a thing's 'non-essential properties' (Bender, 2023). The implications of this reading are far-reaching. For example, scholars have suggested that this distinction sheds light on how modes can be predicated from substance (Melamed, 2013, Chapter 1), and how modes can be causally effective (Hübner, 2015; Viljanen, 2011; Ward, 2011; Zylstra, 2023).

My contribution proposes to revisit the issue of '*propria*' in Spinoza's philosophy. As I will argue, the optimism about '*propria*' in Spinoza studies offers an interesting case for discussing the opportunities and risk of aligning interpretations of early modern texts to contemporary concepts. Exploring this topic may provide insights for addressing one of the two broader-question question of this conference: "how we do study early modern philosophy today." Indeed, the rise of '*propria*' within Spinoza scholarship mirrors a renewed interest in this concept within contemporary metaphysics, largely influenced by Kit Fine's reconceptualization of the distinction between '*propria*' and essential properties in Aristotle's work (Fine, 1994). It seems likely that the growing emphasis on '*propria*' among Spinoza scholars has been encouraged, if not directly inspired, by Fine's studies (but cf. Carriero, 1991, p. 73). Indeed, Fine's approach and the treatment of '*propria*' in Spinoza scholarship share a key-assumption: according to Fine, *propria* are related to thing's essence because they are logically implied by it. In the same vein, Spinoza scholars have been characterizing '*propria*' as properties which necessarily follow from a thing's essence.

However, importing this neo-Aristotelian concept into interpretations of Spinoza's philosophy may raise several worries. First, it is well-established that early modern thinkers had a complex relationship with the work of Aristotle – this is especially true for Spinoza. Much of his philosophy can be interpreted as a critical revision of the Aristotelian heritage. We should thus be cautious when relying on '*propria*' for making sense of Spinoza's thought. Second, like all philosophical concepts, '*propria*' not only solve certain problems but also generate new ones. For example, scholars have noted that '*propria*' cannot follow from certain features of Aristotelian essences as Aristotelian essences are unified wholes (Oderberg, 2011). Thus, adopting an Aristotelian concept of '*propria*' risks importing Aristotelian problems into Spinoza's philosophy – problems which might not be his own. Third, the textual evidence for

Spinoza's usage of the term is rather thin. Spinoza deploys the '*propria*' only in his early writings. In his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, it is literally absent.

In the first part of my contribution, I will give a short overview of interpretations which emphasize the role of '*propria*' for understanding Spinoza's philosophy and show that they are tightly related to the neo-Aristotelian concept of '*propria*' proposed by Kit Fine. In a second part, I will analyse Spinoza's usage of the concept of '*propria*' in his early *Short Treatise*. I will argue that Spinoza's deployment of '*propria*' is surprising because it exhibits features that are incompatible with a neo-Aristotelian account of '*propria*'. However, Spinoza's approach becomes less surprising if we take into account the views of some of his contemporaries. To support this claim, the third step of my contribution will examine some alternative engagements with '*propria*' during Spinoza's lifetime. Finally, I will offer a tentative answer to the question for why '*propria*' are not a proper concept (anymore) in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

(694 words)

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