

The Metaphysical Significance of Early Modern Philosophy: The Case of Spinoza

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While there is a long tradition of stressing and celebrating the *epistemological* significance of early modern philosophy (in its attempt to justify our knowledge claims in novel and profound ways), I will emphasize (and recommend!) the *metaphysical* significance of the philosophy of this period. Specifically, I highlight the metaphysical character of early modern thought that has been noted by Peter F. Strawson, who described Descartes, Leibniz, and Berkeley as being engaged in “revisionary metaphysics”. Strawson distinguished this type of metaphysics from what he termed “descriptive metaphysics” and which he took philosophers like Aristotle and Kant to have been concerned with and which he himself pursued.

According to Strawson (1959: 9), “[d]escriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.” More recently, Herman Cappelen framed revisionary metaphysics in terms of conceptual engineering, which he defined as the “critical/constructive enterprise of assessing and improving our representational devices” (Cappelen 2018: 3, see also 24).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, using the example of Spinoza, that the revisionary metaphysics of early modern philosophers can be aptly conceived as a form of conceptual engineering and that it is this aspect of early modern philosophy which makes it a particularly valuable to study.

I argue that Spinoza’s philosophy is a prime example of conceptual engineering, observable on to at least two levels: (a) In developing his philosophical system, Spinoza *employs* the technique of conceptual engineering to transform traditional philosophical concepts such as SUBSTANCE, GOD, and FREEDOM to articulate a new philosophical outlook. (b) In his epistemology and ethics Spinoza also *teaches* the technique of conceptual engineering as the method for acquiring proper understanding and true happiness, asserting that both goals can be attained by making our ideas more adequate.

After outlining these two levels of conceptual engineering in Spinoza’s philosophy, I address the criterion for success of Spinoza’s constructive enterprise: How do we know that the transformation of our ideas or concepts has been successful? While contemporary

philosophers often rely on intuitions –what strikes us as “intuitively plausible”– Spinoza rejects this method, particularly forcefully in the appendix of the first part of his *Ethics*, where he shows that impressions of plausibility are often products of ignorance. Instead, Spinoza famously holds that “truth is its own standard” (E2p43s), such that “[h]e who has a true idea at the same time knows that he has a true idea” (E2p43). For Spinoza then, successfully improved concepts or adequate ideas are self-vindicating: once we arrive at an adequate conception of a thing, we know and can explain why we conceive of it correctly.

Interpreting Spinoza as a conceptual engineer is not only a fruitful and faithful way of understanding his philosophical thought, but also offers an intriguing answer to the conference’s question why we should study early philosophy: Given that much of contemporary philosophy is committed to conceptual analysis and descriptive metaphysics that seeks to accommodate our intuitions, Spinoza’s revisionary metaphysics (along with that of many other early modern authors) offers a refreshing alternative. Studying early modern philosophy in general –and that of Spinoza in particular– teaches us the merits, techniques, and challenges of engaging in revisionary metaphysics and the go beyond our received views and what strikes us as “intuitively plausible”.

Literature

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(If desired, the paper can also be given in German).