

# Introduction

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The philosophy of Baruch Spinoza is notoriously easy to fascinate the reader, and complex to interpret and reconstruct as a system. One of the features that most crucially generates such hardship is the rhizomatic nature of Spinoza's philosophy, which ensures that readers and scholars attempting to interpret his works can never focus on a singular topic. Instead, they are dragged into a constant re-interpretation of the whole system in the light of individual issues and theses. Nowhere is this rhizomatic nature more evident than in the complex concept of "expression", a model-notion that has consistently lured *and* evaded the efforts of generation after generation of historians of philosophy.

Spinoza's philosophy receives and catalyzes multiple traditions through the notion of expression: from the Neo-Platonic concept of emanation to the Kabbalistic *Seder hishtalshelusii*, through more rationalistic views of the connection between definitions and ideas as well as between a cause and its effects. Moreover, expression consistently appears in most domains of Spinoza's *corpus*, such as his metaphysics, his philosophy of language, and his political philosophy. For these reasons, providing a unitary account of "expression" in Spinoza's thought is a complex task, perhaps beyond the reach of even the most well-equipped interpreters. Gilles Deleuze famously brought this concept to the limelight of scholarly attention with his 1968 volume, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, which stands until today as a key text for the interpretation of the notion of expression in the works of Spinoza. Inspired by the singular focus provided by Deleuze, in more recent works, scholars of all traditions have attempted their own systematization of this concept. Researchers belonging both to the analytic camp and the continental tradition (and oftentimes, those showcasing mixed attitudes about these labels) have focused on individual applications of expression, in order to gain knowledge of this complex whole through its parts.

A similar approach, if more nuanced, is what we propose to adopt in this issue. Our goal is to unite multiple contributions by a combination of leading researchers in the field and emerging junior scholars to piece together Spinoza's puzzle. Each essay, single-authored by one of our contributors, will examine a unique aspect of Spinoza's notion of expression, thus limiting the overreaching temptation that the rhizomatic nature of his philosophy usually triggers. Our objective is to propose a multifaceted, but still consistent, perspective on the notion of expression.

The issue thus serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it will be useful to seasoned scholars grappling with the problem of expression, providing an informed and complete set of new approaches to address this long-standing concern with Spinoza's philosophy. On the other hand, it will help thinkers who are unfamiliar with Spinoza to access important scholarship through a singularly focused lens, i.e., the connection between essence and existence through expression, a theme which ties Spinoza to major tendencies in both the history of philosophy and contemporary thought.

For this issue, we have elaborated a three-pronged approach in the hope of delivering a comprehensive but multifaceted reading of Spinoza's philosophy of expression. The first direction that the authors have taken is that of historical collocation. The goal, here, has been to situate Spinoza's expressionist claims in the historical context of Continental rationalism, as much as this flawed historical category can help one decipher the respective philosophies of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Andrew Burnside and Sarah Tropper have respectively grappled with the notion of expression as it appears in Descartes and Leibniz, analyzing how they are eminently connected to Spinoza through this theoretical lens.

The second "prong" of our analysis has been a purely metaphysical/theoretical one, where expression has been taken seriously as one of the founding elements of Spinoza's understanding of reality in its complex and organized structure. The essay authored by Alexander X. Douglas, as well as the one I provide, both undertake the task of analyzing expression in its internal features and its theological-metaphysical import. Our papers propose alternative but not mutually exclusive resources to qualify and quantify the impact of expression on Spinoza's ontological system and its interactions with the other (perhaps more familiar) relations identifiable within Spinoza's philosophy, such as causation, conception, and inherence.

The third and final direction that this issue develops is the application of Spinoza's idiosyncratic notion of expression in philosophical branches that are not, *ipso facto*, identified as metaphysical or ontological. In particular, Steph Marston develops an analysis of expression as the founding feature of social resilience and cohesion; Francesca Di Poppa similarly advances an

interpretation that ties together notions of metaphysical individuality, expressive freedom, and ethical liberation under the sign of expression. The hope for this multifaceted approach is to leave unturned as few stones as possible, in the effort of offering a comprehensive representation of the overall impact that expression has on the philosophy of Spinoza.

Such an effort, of course, could not have been produced without the invaluable help of a host of people, too many to remember here individually. However, let me take a moment to offer my thanks to my fellow contributors, who have produced some of the best pieces of scholarship I have had the pleasure of reading. Moreover, I am deeply thankful for their availability to share these research efforts with the general public in advance of this publication, while they were still in draft stage, to the audience constituted by our friends at VAMP (Vanderbilt Modern Philosophy), who I also thank for their enthusiastic participation and insightful comments. Finally, I must thank the numerous scholars who have collaborated with this project in various capacities, from peer reviewers to conceptual advisors, from supporters to friendly counselors. In this number, I would like to single out (in no particular order) Susan James, Noa Shein, Yitzhak Melamed, Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn Goodman, Daniel Spiro, Francesco Toto, Gennaro Luise, Antonio Petagine, Alberto Luis López, Zachary Gartenberg, Luce deLire, Pietro Ingallina, and Scott Aikin. And finally, our warmest thanks should go to Dana Jalobeanu and Vlad Alexandrescu, for their support as Editors of this *Journal of Early Modern Studies*.