

# Learning How to Be Infinite

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on some of the more controversial points in Jenny Bunker's reply to Adrian W. Moore concerning his account of Spinoza. In particular, it raises the question of whether Moore has conceived of certain aspects of the relations between modes in a substantial manner and points to some of the consequences that would follow. Finally, it argues, *contra* Moore, that the perspective *sub specie aeternitatis* does not imply draining reality of all value and meaning but conceiving of values as relative. In contrast, the perspective *in mediis rebus* implies conceiving of values as substantial attributes of things, being the cause that ultimately leads to nihilism, understood as contempt for the world.

**Key words:** Bunker, Moore, Spinoza, infinite, substance, modes, nihilism, values.

1. Towards the end of her reply, Jenny Bunker points out that Adrian Moore has built the case of the two new chapters of *The Infinite* on “philosophical history and analysis of huge erudition and brilliance” (2021, 37). In highlighting Moore's scholarship and analytical depth, Bunker refers to his remarkable work as a historian of philosophy, drawing on his philosophical knowledge to illustrate the various conceptions of infinity held by some of the most influential philosophers, logicians and mathematicians. The label “philosophical history”, however, suggests that Moore has not merely operated as a historian of philosophy but also as a philosopher of history, using historical sources to illustrate the central thesis of his essay: the infinite is ungraspable, since it does not refer to anything actually existing, but, at the same time, it is an indispensable notion for dealing with our lives on the ethical and existential dimensions.

This thesis, as Bunker observes, is “shaped by Adrian's authoritative knowledge of Kant and Wittgenstein” (37). The Kantian influence is apparent in presenting infinity as a regulative idea. If we were to act only based on our finitude, we would not set out on essential endeavours that we could hardly undertake in the span of our short lives. However, if we believe that we have an infinite amount of time to accomplish them, there would be nothing to prevent us from procrastinating. I fancy James Dean must have had something similar in mind when he urged us to dream as if we would live forever and to live as if we would die today. Now, since the notion of infinity, according to Moore, is essentially nonsensical and incomprehensible, one can only show its occurrence while avoiding any temptation to explain it, according to the famous Wittgensteinian distinction between showing and saying.

The problem, subtly hinted at by Bunker, is whether Moore's legitimate philosophical interests have interfered with his account of Spinoza, Hegel, and Nietzsche. It is thus a question of elucidating what Moore has not found in these authors when looking at them through the Kantian glass. Hence, Bunker focuses the majority of her questions “on issues of the correct interpretation of Spinoza and Nietzsche”

(36). Among the four questions that Bunker explicitly poses: “one about Spinoza, one about Nietzsche, and two about Moore’s own propositions” (30), I will focus on the one concerning Spinoza, which I think is of most interest. In my view, Bunker’s question about Spinoza leads us to a significant criticism of Moore’s interpretation, namely, his inability to explain the differentiation of Spinoza’s modes in a purely positive way. After developing this point, I will turn to another important aspect of Spinoza’s thought that both Moore and Bunker seem to have overlooked: the role that Spinoza’s concept of infinity and the subsequent relativity of values play as an antidote to nihilism and remorse.

2. The question Bunker addresses to Moore is related to the role of negation in Spinoza’s understanding of finite modes. This is the question Bunker raises explicitly. But this does not prevent her from mentioning, at the beginning of her conclusion, some of the many questions she has refrained from asking him. Among them would be the question of “whether Spinoza’s concept of *natura naturans* (counterbalances the understanding of God as the being of entities and) offers any prospect of explaining God’s transcendence in terms of aspects rather than parts” (36).

In this single sentence, Bunker encapsulates an objection of far-reaching significance: Moore has neglected the crucial distinction in Spinoza’s thought between the substance and its modes. In depicting Spinoza’s God as “the being of entities”, a kind of ontological equivalent of the Set of all Sets, Moore has neglected that the modes of the substance are not properly “entities”, or at least not in the same way as the substance is. In Moore’s own words: “When he [Spinoza] argued that there was an absolute unified simple eternal substance of which everything else was but a mode, he was really just treating the being that was common to every entity as itself an entity” (2019, 238). To counter Moore’s reading, we can summarily say that, for Spinoza, the distinctive feature of a substance is to be the cause of itself. Thus, a substance does not need something else to be or to be conceived. For this reason, a substance must be infinite since, if it were to be finite, it would have to be conceived as such from something else that limits it. This leads him to conclude that the substance can only be unique. Accordingly, the things of the world, ideas and bodies, can only be conceived as modes, that is, as being in something else in virtue of which they are conceived. If this is so, things cannot be conceived of as finite, independent, and self-subsistent substances, but in an intrinsically relational way. Hence, finitude can be conceived of neither substantially nor as a property of existing things conceivable by itself.

This brings us to the question explicitly posed by Bunker about the soundness of Moore’s distinction between two possible ways of conceiving the individuation of modes: by “differentiation” and by “delineation” (2023, 25-26). As Bunker points out, according to Moore’s account, negation in Spinoza would explain the delineation of finite things. In the case of the delineation of bodies, Moore uses the example of the house and the garden to show how finite bodies are distinguished from their

“surroundings”: “a house and a garden each have a positive existence in their own right, but the house is not the garden, it ‘lacks being in the garden outside it’, as he [Moore] puts it” (10). According to this, bodies would be defined by a merely negative trait: their lack of being. To clarify this point, Moore compares Spinoza’s account of negation with his conception of error: “if one is right to reject  $p$ , and if someone else  $A$  accepts  $p$ , then, in Spinoza’s view, this indicates something *lacking* in  $A$ . All contents of  $A$ ’s mind – all of  $A$ ’s ideas, in Spinoza’s own terminology – are part of what is, and they pertain to what is, and they contain no error. The error comes about only because  $A$  is ignorant of what lies beyond these ideas and proceeds in a way that is appropriate to what is not” (2019, 242). But in his *Ethics*, Spinoza carefully distinguishes error from ignorance. Error is not ignorance, but the deprivation of knowledge implicit in inadequate ideas (2p35d).<sup>1</sup> And an idea becomes inadequate when we consider the idea perceived by the human mind together with the idea of something else (2p11c). For example, if Oedipus had grown up an orphan, he would not know who his mother is, but he would know that he does not know. But by believing that his mother is Merope, he does not even know that he does not know. We say that Oedipus is deprived of knowledge of his mother by considering the idea in Oedipus’ mind (the idea that his mother is Merope) alongside another idea outside his mind (the idea that his mother is Jocasta). Therefore, error, as a privation, is something that happens to ideas when considering them in relation to other ideas, but it does not express anything positive about them. And what has been said about ideas, following Moore’s analogy, must be applied to bodies. Thus, finitude, understood as “delineation”, can only have a privative sense: it is a property that supervenes on bodies by relating them to one another, but it does not define them. On the contrary, “delineation” presupposes the previous “differentiation” of bodies and is built upon it.

That is why Bunker suggests a conception of bodies more faithful to Spinoza’s thought: bodies distinguish themselves as proportions of “motion and rest” (10). Indeed, motion does not imply the negation of rest, nor vice versa. Motion and rest are not contrary terms but correlative. Yet, if we accept that bodies distinguish themselves and differ from each other relationally, we will see that the example of the house and the garden will simply not do. Firstly, because nothing prevents us from conceiving the house and the garden as finite substances existing by themselves and conceivable independently of each other: we can conceive of a house without a garden and a garden without a house. And, secondly, because not being a garden does not express any positive feature of the house, just as not being a house does not say anything about the garden. Thus, as Bunker notes, by presenting finite bodies as the outcome of a delineation process, Moore envisages Spinoza’s bodies in a Cartesian manner, that is, as the “parts” that result from dividing extension. To illustrate and further develop the interpretation of Spinoza’s account of bodies suggested by Bunker, I propose to imagine them as chess pieces. The knight is not distinguished from the bishop by its figure, nor even because

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[1] All references to the *Ethics* are to Curley’s translation: Spinoza 1985.

it lacks something that the bishop has, but by the distinctive moves it can carry out. In turn, the actual mobility of a knight at a given position and time can only be adequately conceived by considering the position and potential moves of the surrounding pieces on the chessboard. In that sense, the knight is not distinguished from its surroundings by a negative feature since its singular essence (its capacity of movement in certain and determined circumstances) includes the complete configuration of the remaining pieces of the board that condition and determine it. And so, since each finite mode implies each of the infinite configurations of pieces that can be arranged on a chessboard, these modes, as Bunker proposes, should be conceived as “aspects” rather than “parts” or, in other words, as each of the infinite gestures of an infinitely expressive face.<sup>2</sup>

3. I now turn to an aspect of Moore’s interpretation of Spinoza that Bunker has not addressed in her reply. It regards the anthropological significance of infinity and its relation to nihilism and the relativity of values. I aim to stress several points of Spinoza’s thought that I think Moore has failed to notice and that differ considerably from his own views on the matter. For Spinoza, the human mind is nothing but the idea of a body (2p13). But the mind does not know itself except by the affections that its body experiences when it is determined by an external body (2p23). Moreover, the idea of this affection does not imply an adequate idea of the body itself (2p19) or the external body (2p25). Consequently, our immediate perceptions appear to us as conclusions without premises, mutilated and detached from the set of relations that determines them. And this is what explains the human inclination to regard the things of the world as finite substances, that is, as free or causes of themselves, for to imagine something as free is simply to imagine it (5p5). Only the idea of God (understood but not imagined) will enable us to escape from the prison of finitude and conceive of ourselves and the things around us as modes of an absolutely infinite substance.

Conversely, in conceiving of things as substances, we believe that we like something because it is good: we like ice cream because it is good, or we are fond of a particular fellow because he is nice. Goodness is an attribute of ice cream, regardless of who tastes it. But when those same things, as we change our disposition towards them and how they affect us, do not meet our expectations, we will consider them deprived of the goodness we once attributed to them and thereby we despise them. In this way, we will fall into contempt of the world, or as Nietzsche would say, into the ascetic ideal. Indeed, one could argue that, for Spinoza, contempt is the quintessential metaphysical passion insofar as it leads us to focus on what is not rather than on what is (3p52s). Instead, by conceiving things as modes, we will understand that ice cream is only good insofar as we like it. Moreover, instead of despising the things of the world, deriding, or condemning them, we will try to understand how they enable us to enjoy their potentialities to the best of our ability. Therefore, the relativity of values in Spinoza

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[2] On the conception of modes as gestures see Lin 2006, 151-152.

does not lead us, as Moore believes, to nihilism (2019, 252-3) but rather constitutes its antidote.

But this entails another critical side of Spinoza's relativism that neither Moore nor Bunker have considered. For it is the same antidote that spares us from falling into nihilism that allows us to free ourselves from remorse, as long as conceiving of things as modes involves conceiving ourselves as so. Only by conceiving ourselves as substances, that is, as the cause of our affections and actions, can we regard ourselves as the cause of our sadness, adding to it remorse and abjection. In this sense, the other side of contempt for the world is contempt for oneself. Thus, for instance, if I believe myself to be the cause of my own jealousy, I will add to this sorrow the hatred I feel for myself as the cause of this despicable passion (4p54). If, on the other hand, I remove free will from the equation and conceive of my affections as modes, I will understand that my jealousy is the necessary and inevitable effect of the relations I establish with my environment, which determine me. Thus, instead of cursing myself and trying to repress what I feel, I will look for ways to escape this situation, provided it is within my reach.

4. I still vividly recall when, many years ago, my old logic professor, Calixto Badesa, proposed *The Infinite* as recommended reading in his subject. The clarity and depth of its analysis, the enormous erudition, and the originality of its philosophical proposal made a deep impression on me. Since then, Moore's book has become an inseparable companion and an obligatory reference on the subject of infinity, making me reread it several times. I immediately got a copy when I discovered that Moore had published a third edition in which he expanded his account of Spinoza. I hoped to find something I had missed in the previous editions, such as, for instance, a thorough treatment of the concept of infinity that Spinoza expounds in his famous letter to Lodewijk Meyer or an interpretation of his unique conception of the mediate and immediate infinite modes. Although Moore cites the *Letter on the Infinite* in a footnote (2019, 249 n. 8), his interest in Spinoza leads him to focus on other aspects of his thought, especially those of an ethical and moral character, which he manages to integrate into his essay without undermining his central thesis: "Hardly anything in what follows will constitute an outright retraction of what has gone before" (237). I believe, however, that by overlooking those features of Spinoza's thought most at odds with his views, Moore has missed the opportunity to engage with a real devil's advocate, which might have led him to refine and reinforce his claims.

In my reply, I have deliberately chosen to emphasise the most controversial points of Bunker's reply and pinpoint other problem in Moore's interpretation of Spinoza that in my view she omits. However, these critiques do not take away from my deep agreement with Bunker about the importance of this book, not only as a major philosophical contribution but also as an unavoidable reference for those interested in the history of the concept of infinity and its philosophical complexities. In addition, the divergences I have stressed between Spinoza's and Moore's philosophical propositions

should not conceal their deep affinity, as Bunker has pointed out in her reply. Anyone who opens for the first time the third book of the *Ethics* may have the strange impression that Spinoza has tried to work a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid. With his essay, Moore has undeniably shown the intimate implications that a concept as seemingly abstract and mathematical as the infinite has in the ethical and existential domain of our lives.

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