

Future Research

John Morrison

My plans for the immediate future include further work on both Spinoza and the philosophy of perception.

I have in mind two projects about Spinoza. The first is an investigation into his remarks on mind-body identity. Spinoza famously claims that the mind and body are “one and the same.” However, he also claims that the mind and body have different causal properties. Many are unsure how to reconcile these two claims; it seems that if the mind is really identical to the body then they must share all the same properties. I think that it is significant that *immediately* after he claims that the mind and body are “one and the same” Spinoza alludes to Maimonides’s and Aquinas’s remarks on God’s relationship to his own intellect. I think that this passage, which most scholars ignore, is Spinoza’s attempt to tell us that he is talking about a kind of identity that allows identical things to have slightly different causal properties. To the extent that we can make sense of contingent identity and relative identity, I suspect that we can also make sense of this other kind of identity. This project will involve a close examination of Maimonides’s and Aquinas’s theological views.

Second, I plan to clarify Spinoza’s seemingly impenetrable remarks on infinite modes. I think that Spinoza’s remarks are, in part, a reaction to Descartes’s remarks on beings of reason. Descartes characterizes beings of reason as things that are neither substances nor modes and that exist only in the mind. Examples include numbers and shapes. There are two reasons why Spinoza cannot countenance beings of reason (at least when characterized in this way). First, he claims that only substances and modes exist. Second, he claims that anything that exists in the mind must also exist in the body. Because Spinoza cannot countenance beings of reason, and because numbers and shapes were supposed to be among the beings of reason, it might seem that there is no room in Spinoza’s ontology for numbers and shapes. However, I think that numbers and shapes are among Spinoza’s infinite modes. More generally, I think that one of the reasons that Spinoza introduces infinite modes is to serve as a replacement for Descartes’s beings of reason. In this way, I hope to use two obscure parts of Spinoza’s philosophy - his view of infinite modes and his view of numbers and shapes - to clarify one another.

I also have in mind two projects about perception. First, I plan to bring psychophysics to bear on philosophical debates about perception. For example, I am interested in the structure of the “spaces” represented by our visual experiences. Philosophers tend to assume that we should think of these spaces as constructed out of colored points, but that is an assumption

that should be questioned. For example, it makes it difficult to explain why we can sometimes recognize a pattern without also recognizing it as located in a particular spot. I suspect that more advanced models of visual encoding developed by psychophysicists, such as those that utilize Fourier analysis, will help provide a more satisfying framework for thinking about how these spaces are constructed. I am also interested in whether we should think of consciousness as coming in degrees. Consider the experiences toward the periphery of your visual field. If you're like me, while you might be conscious of something red, you might not be conscious of any particular shade of red. Perhaps we should regard this as a case where you are conscious of magenta *to some degree*, conscious of scarlet *to some degree*, and so on until the degrees add to one, which is why you are conscious of something as red without being (completely) conscious of any particular shade.

Second, I plan to explore the ways in which our visual experiences are vague. One issue is whether our visual experiences are vague in the same sense that terms like 'bald' are sometimes said to be vague. I doubt that they are; I suspect that our visual experiences involve a kind of vagueness that cannot be understood within the framework of standard theories of vagueness like supervaluationsim and epistemicism. A second issue is about how vagueness complicates the relationship between phenomenology and representation. For example, at least with regard to color and shape, it is natural to think that the vagueness of our visual representations is a product of the blurriness of our visual phenomenology. But suppose that you are looking at two lines that seem parallel. Suppose also that your experience has perfectly precise phenomenology. Intuitively, because your visual experience does not take a stand on whether you live in a perfectly Euclidean world, your experience does not take a stand on whether, if extended, those lines would intersect after a million miles. But, also intuitively, your experience *does* take a stand on whether, if extended, those lines would intersect after three meters. Because there seems to be no precise distance at which our experience no longer takes a stand, this suggests that there is vagueness in what we visually represent that is not a product of the blurriness of our visual phenomenology.