

## WHAT MAKES A SIMILARITY SUPERFICIAL? AN EXERCISE IN THE METHODOLOGY OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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The essay reports on the author's attempts to demonstrate similarities between *prima facie* divergent thinkers. Objections to this attempt have often concerned the question of the “superficiality” of the similarities noted. The paper examines these objections and proposes an understanding of the relevant concept of superficiality as a consequence of what Alan Nelson called “systematic interpretation”. Subsequently, Nelson's view is challenged, and thus a space is opened up for a history of philosophy focused more on the similarities between different thinkers than on the supposed uniqueness and incomparability of their thought.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant – Baruch Spinoza – Methodology of the history of philosophy – Superficial similarities – Alan Nelson

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (A654/B682; Kant 1998, 749) distinguishes between the faculty of mind concerned with discovering hidden similarities (*ingenium comparans*) that he calls “wit” (*Witz*) and the faculty of detecting subtle, latent differences (*ingenium argutans*) that he associates with “acuteness” (*Scharfsinn*). For someone who wants to pursue a career in the history of philosophy, it is way more comfortable to be endowed with acuteness than with wit. Wit may be helpful and welcomed at the post-conference dinner, but during the conference itself, it is acuteness that is expected and demanded from a speaker. It simply befits a scholar to make nuanced distinctions instead of forcing awkward claims of identity or similarity between various philosophers and consequently frustrate the well-established division of labour together with patterns of efficient intellectual production. However, there are people with scholarly aspirations who find the “witty” search for identity more natural than the “acute” search for differences. And precisely for this reason they might encounter obstacles in the academia. Admittedly, this is a statement based on a personal experience and observation of an author. Rather than constituting proper evidence, it

is designed to resonate with those who have been accused of “superficiality” in the search for commonalities among various philosophical doctrines, and who did not really know what that accusation amounted to.

Since there is a lack of philosophical literature on the concept of superficial similarity, I would like to start with psychology, where it serves as an analytic category intended to clarify the phenomenon of analogical thinking (Blanchette, Dunbar 2000). Analogical thinking is said to be inquirable in terms of structural and superficial similarities. The distinction is straightforward: structural similarity refers to the common structure in which given objects occur and superficial similarity focuses on the similarity between the objects themselves. To make it clearer, I will propose an example. Consider these two sentences:

- a) Monday morning is bad.
- b) Friday evening is good.

The structural similarity between these two entities consists in the common syntax. Both are subject-predicate statements. They share the grammatical structure. The superficial similarity between them, on the other hand, consists, e.g., in them both being about the days of the week. Thus, there exists between them the similarity concerning objects themselves; Monday and Friday fall under the same general category. The distinction between superficial and structural similarity in the realm of psychology is not conceived normatively. It is a descriptive tool that helps explicate human capacity to find different things “the same” in one way or another.

In connection with this, note that the normatively construed superficiality could be introduced to both of these descriptive categories. I will use now N-superficiality (and its cognates) for the normative grasp of the phenomenon and D-superficiality (and its cognates) for its descriptive deployment. A logician could state that the grammatical structure amounts to an N-superficial D-structural similarity and the “real” structure between the two above statements must be unearthed by modern logic. Otherwise, she could add, we will fall into the unwanted and “long-dismissed” philosophical perplexities with the ontological argument for God’s existence ranking high among them. The same holds for the D-superficial similarity. One could come up with the N-non-superficial D-superficial similarity in the case of the two sentences in question. The similarity concerning the days of the week is arguably exactly this: it is *not* N-superficial, although superficial in its technical meaning (i.e. D-superficial) as it reports on the similarity between *objects* in question. Think, however, about someone who answers the question “what these two above sentences have in common?” by saying that “they both talk about good and evil, entities Spinoza treats in the *Ethics*”.

This is clearly a case of N-superficial D-superficial similarity because, again, it involves the *objects* in question, but is obviously far-fetched.

What concerns me here is the normative meaning of superficiality that is presupposed by the objections deploying this category in a pejorative sense. I came across the objection from superficial similarities while I was trying to substantiate the idea that Spinoza's and Kant's ethical outlooks are more similar than different. The similarities I would point out between these thinkers concerned crucial ethical issues. I argued that

- 1) Kant and Spinoza share the idea of morally understood reason as a “better part” (Spinoza 1985, 594) or a “proper self” (Kant 1996, 104) of a human being.
- 2) Spinoza struggles with the Latin word *bonum* (Spinoza 1985, 543 – 546) as ambiguous between objective good (Kantian *Gute*) and subjective good (Kantian *Wohl*; cf. Kant 2002, 80). And they acknowledge *both* concepts as valid (see Kozyra 2018).
- 3) Like Kant, Spinoza stresses the importance of inner motivation for the morality of actions. For instance, he says in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that only those who act with proper “consent of the mind” (*consensu animi*; Spinoza 2007, 69 – 70), which in the case at hand consists in the internalization of the prescription of honesty, can be “truly called just” in opposition to people who are just only because they “fear the gallows” (Spinoza 2007, 58).
- 4) The law mentioned in 3) is moral. Every example of “dictates of reason” that Spinoza gives is recognizably moral. The best example being the “Kantian” categorical prohibition of lying present in proposition 72 of the IV book of the *Ethics* (cf. Walther 2012).
- 5) The issue of man being or not being a part of “nature” becomes rather unexciting after the notion of nature that is at stake here is understood. Spinoza does not construe nature materialistically (*res cogitans* has the same right to exist as an attribute of the substance as *res extensa*). Instead, Spinoza is a “nomist”. He claims that to be a part of nature means to follow under the law, and since *everything* is law-governed, everything falls within the purview of nature. Human beings, in turn, respond either to the laws of reason (laws of their “better part”) or “laws of appetite” (laws of general nature; cf. Kozyra 2018). The preservation of one's *conatus* under the laws of reason is law-governed but has nothing to do with materialistically understood naturalism. It consists in rational self-determination. Under this broadly “nomological” sense of “nature”, Kant is also a nomist. He says in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that “nature in the most general meaning is the existence of things

under laws” (Kant 2002, 62). The human being can be a subject of these laws either as a passive “phenomenon” (i.e. as a part of the “sensible nature”) or as an active “noumenon” (i.e. as a part of the “suprasensible nature”; *ibidem*). Both Kant and Spinoza support “nomism” as far as they claim that no event can be an exception from the laws of nature where “nature” is conceived along the lines indicated in the Second Critique.

- 6) They share an ideal of morality as a self-realisation rather than self-sacrifice (see Kozyra 2022a).

Now I would like to turn to my main concern, which, rather than showing that I am right about Kant’s and Spinoza’s moral theories, is to say what would it mean to argue that such-like similarities are superficial. During my presentation at the Polish Philosophical Really 2018 I presented arguments for some of the above points. I received in response a critical remark from one of the participants, a person knowledgeable about Kant, that the similarities I show are superficial, because, after all, Spinoza was a “dogmatist” and Kant a “criticist”. This is what Friedrich Heman wrote in a classical “Kant und Spinoza” from 1901. There we read: “*Dogmatism and Criticism* relate to each other like fire and water; they are opposite statements that mutually exclude and reciprocally negate each other” (Heman 1901, 319). And given that, according to Heman, only through some illicit manipulation one could arrive at the “superficial similarities” (*oberflächliche Ähnlichkeiten*) between these two thinkers, no matter if they would pertain to theoretical or practical philosophy. Another time I received a review of a paper which stated that my comparison between Kant and Spinoza concerning their notions of Christianity and Judaism is “one-sided” because it neglects the “framework of their criticism” (this referred, supposedly, to Spinoza’s “atheism” and Kant’s “theism”<sup>1</sup>). It is another instance of some overarching narratives about the philosophers in question delegitimizing the micro-phenomena that seem to pose a threat to their lofty status.

With that on board, I think that superficiality, in the context at hand, can be conceived as a specific kind of one-sidedness mentioned by the reviewer. This one-sidedness is said to reside in the prioritization of the local similarities over the overarching structures or frameworks. On this reading, superficial similarity in philosophical comparatistics refers to the similarity identified between particular claims, which at the same time is supposed to overlook the difference in the “framework” (or “structure”) within which these claims are thought to operate.

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<sup>1</sup> Later, however, I realized that they actually differ significantly in their assessment of Judaism and Christianity, but for reasons other than those concerning the “framework” (see Kozyra 2022b). Nevertheless, I must give justice to the reviewer, whose concerns were, after all, quite valid.

The framework-oriented history of philosophy received a theoretical formulation, for instance, in Alan Nelson's article "Philosophical Systems and their History". Nelson claims that "systematic interpreters tend to see thoughts of great thinkers as growing in detail from early works to later works" (Nelson 2013, 242). Accordingly, their "goal is to retrieve as fully as possible... the doctrine" (ibidem, 243), that is, the guiding thought of the philosopher in question that occupied her from her first till her last days as a thinker. Then, once "the systematic interpreter has this picture of a stable doctrine underlying the text, there is less pressure to see changes over time in the philosopher's mode of expression as reflecting deep shifts in the doctrine" (ibidem). In other words, "the doctrine" is a hermeneutic tool that allows us to force consistency on the text (because it is "very unlikely that these geniuses left major inconsistencies in their thinking"; Nelson 2013, 239) in virtue of treating it as a demand of "interpretative charity" (ibidem) to agree the uniformity of "the doctrine" with the polyphony of the text. This view makes possible the objection from the superficial similarity. As I said, the superficiality of the similarity consists in finding identity between claims at the cost of neglecting the presupposed heterogeneity of the "frameworks", or, for that matter, "the doctrines". In my case, the similarities between Kant and Spinoza were not called "superficial" because they dissolved under the analyses of these similarities themselves. Rather, their superficiality was "deduced" from the general truth about Spinoza and Kant being "doctrinally" worlds apart, like a dogmatist "fire" and critical "water" (in Heman's words). Such-like considerations seem to make up the methodological presupposition of the framework-oriented critiques of the attempts at bridging the gaps between different philosophers. There are many problems with such a presupposition. I will list them now.

- 1) It oddly presupposes that thought is idiosyncratic in a way that it is the exclusive property of a given philosopher that should not (and cannot) be seen as "possessed" at the same time by a different party. I am much more inclined to treat the set of philosophical ideas or problems as a rather fixed body of reality of sorts that has been attracting appropriately-minded people across time. But if the reader disagrees, she can do it with no harm to my cause, because this is the least important argument against Nelson's conception that I want to raise.
- 2) It is irrational as far as a basic feature of rational thinking consists in changing / revising once cherished frameworks, structures, or, "the doctrines" in virtue of the confrontation with the new data that contradict / challenge it. Instead, Nelsonian "systematic interpretation" rewords dogmatism as far it encourages the suppression of all "rebellious" textual plurality for the sake of saving the dogma of "the doctrine".

- 3) This leads me to another objection (relatively unweighty). It is anachronistic because it assumes, under intellectual inertia, the primacy of the “big narratives” over micro-level phenomena.
- 4) How “the doctrine” is to be established? Hardly any corpus of the philosophical texts determines a unique doctrine. Hence the validity of “the doctrine” has to be anchored in the authority of the scholars who administer this putative truth about text’s meaning. Consequently, in the wake of fixing the “canonical” interpretation, the fear of the manifoldness of the original text grows together with the strength of the new-founded orthodoxy. This makes it hard to engage with the text afresh and sets in motion a spurious “consistency theory of truth” that naturally leads to what Dieter Schönecker dubbed *Textvergessenheit* (“forgetfulness of the text”).
- 5) Against its intention, Nelson’s methodology reduces the thought of great thinkers to a dogmatic consistency of an ideologue. The thought that is creative and original, changes, revises, abandons, and often contradicts itself. The depiction of these dynamics does not make it less “worthy” of a great philosopher. On the contrary, it shows great philosophy in all its complex reality. Kant’s notion of freedom is a case in point. Sometimes it seems that Kant argues for the existence of the so-called “freedom to evil” (*Critique of Pure Reason, Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*). Sometimes, the contrary seems to be the case (*Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals, Critique of Practical Reason, Metaphysics of Morals*). All attempts at “consistency” in this context end up either in mistreatment of the non-integrable parts of the text or in “charitable interpretations”<sup>2</sup> which differ from “the doctrine”-strategy only in that they set on it a condition of agreement with our contemporary common sense. It is much more fruitful, I think, to present Kant’s thought concerning freedom in its fluctuation between the theoretical poles of arbitrariness and moral determination. And even if in the end we could not derive from Kant’s writings any consistent lesson for our own thinking and acting, I do not see it as problematic. Quite the opposite, the explicit attempts to “learn” from Kant I read as a disturbing declaration of pushing the business of understanding the text to the secondary position at the cost of treating “the great philosopher” as a kind of motivational speaker.
- 6) It is not easy to tell “the doctrine” apart from particular theses or claims. Despite that, “the doctrine”-account seems to presuppose the substantial idea of a framework as something more than the particular claims that make it up.

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<sup>2</sup> Yitzhak Melamed pointed out the problems with the “charitable” hermeneutics (Melamed 2013).

In this picture, the claims “inhere”, as it were, in the framework that seems to be a kind of “bare particular”. Nominalism about frameworks seems more suggestible as far as the burden of proof seems to lie on those who postulate such “occult qualities” as bare particulars. This nominalism states that frameworks reduce to claims that compose them. According to this view, the framework, which is nothing “over and above” its elements, loses its default right to override “mere” claims.

Notwithstanding this sketchy deliberation about the ontology of frameworks, my aim here does not consist in claiming that we should dispense with them altogether. Frameworks, when treated as falsifiable and not automatically superior to claims, can perhaps promote interpretative work as a sort of organizational principle. Instead, my main concern in this reflection laid in presenting the case for “superficial similarities” (in the technical sense) as standing on their own and being worthy of considering as possible “frameworks”-falsifiers rather than annoying disruptions. If they are pejoratively “superficial”, i.e., insufficient as evidence, the reason for that should be identified in them and not in “the doctrines” they are thought to undermine.

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