**Some merit**

**Grabarnik**

**The Spinoza Network**

The PI takes as a starting point an NEH initiative to create a platform through which digital content will be shared across the nations libraries. In such an initiative, digital books can be enhanced by hypertext, linked multimedia files, and search engines that are capable of extracting subtexts relevant to a particular user's interest. But in all these cases, the PI observes, reading is anchored to, if it does not directly follow, the linear order that the text's author created in writing and publishing a particular work. This reading, or presentation, may not be the most propitious for works whose logical structure does not follow the progressive sequence of the printed text. In such cases digital technology can be used to present the text is a way that follows the logical (non-linear) progression of the argument. Cases cited are Euclid's "Elements," Spinoza's "Ethics", and Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom!"

Not being a scholar of philosophy nor of Spinoza in particular, it is difficult to provide a detailed discussion of the specifics of the proposal. I would agree with the PI that there are cases in which the reading or experience of a book (not necessasrily limited to the ones mentioned in this project) could be enhanced by a non-linear, in fact perhaps multiple non-linear, readings. Yet there are three difficulties that emerge from my reading of the proposal.

The first is that, as the project states, "the complex nature of the subject matter, renders the text open to interpretation". "Interpretation" might have several referents here, but one is certainly the analytical interpretation of the critic. In other words, the non-linear, network reading of Spinoza is the result of a critical study and like any critical study the conclusions might not be shared by others. Unless the PI is considering a malleable user-defined network, which would require a module-centered approach to the division and reconstruction of the text, what is being proposed is a digital critical edition of Spinoza in which the critic or scholar (in this case, the PI) presents his or her case not through a linear argument (e.g., a scholarly article or an annotated edition of the original) but through actual recombination of the material (hopefully this would be accompanied by a type of talmudic commentary on the source and the justification for the particular interpretation of the logical structure of the *Ethics* that is presented).

The second difficulty is that the project is essentially a scholarly, albeit very innovatively conceived, critical edition of one book. So it is hard to see a wide impact on the humanities. Not all books can be so restructured.

The third is that the PI is a specialist in computer science whereas the interpretative facet of this effort will be carried out by consultants.

I think that this proposal could be a successful project for a critical edition of Spinoza (but not for a Digital Humanities grant) if it were headed by a philosopher who aspires to creating a new way of reading a specific text and enlists the support of computer scientists to meet the challenge of building a graphical user interface to accomplish the goal. The digital technology as it stands is focused on support of a single initiative without much impact beyond the present effort. Thus any future proposal should seek support for the critical edition of a single text.

Overview

1. Intellectual significance: Within the realm of Spinoza studies this project could be an interesting contribution both interpretatively and methodologically though a full evaluation of this would by necessity be subject to a review by a philosopher and/or expert in Spinoza.

2. Impact on research and technology: The major impact would be within the realm of Spinoza studies and in creating a model for the digital presentation of other works whose logical structure is considered to be non-linear.

3. Innovation: Theoretically, as I am not versed in studies of Spinoza I cannot comment on the degree to which the presentation offered in this project is innovative. In regard to digital presentation of a published work this project does offer a new model.

4. Proposal development: The project is well presented.

5. Feasibility: Technically the project seems highly doable.

6. Qualifications: The lead or at least co-PI on such a project as this should be a Spinoza scholar.