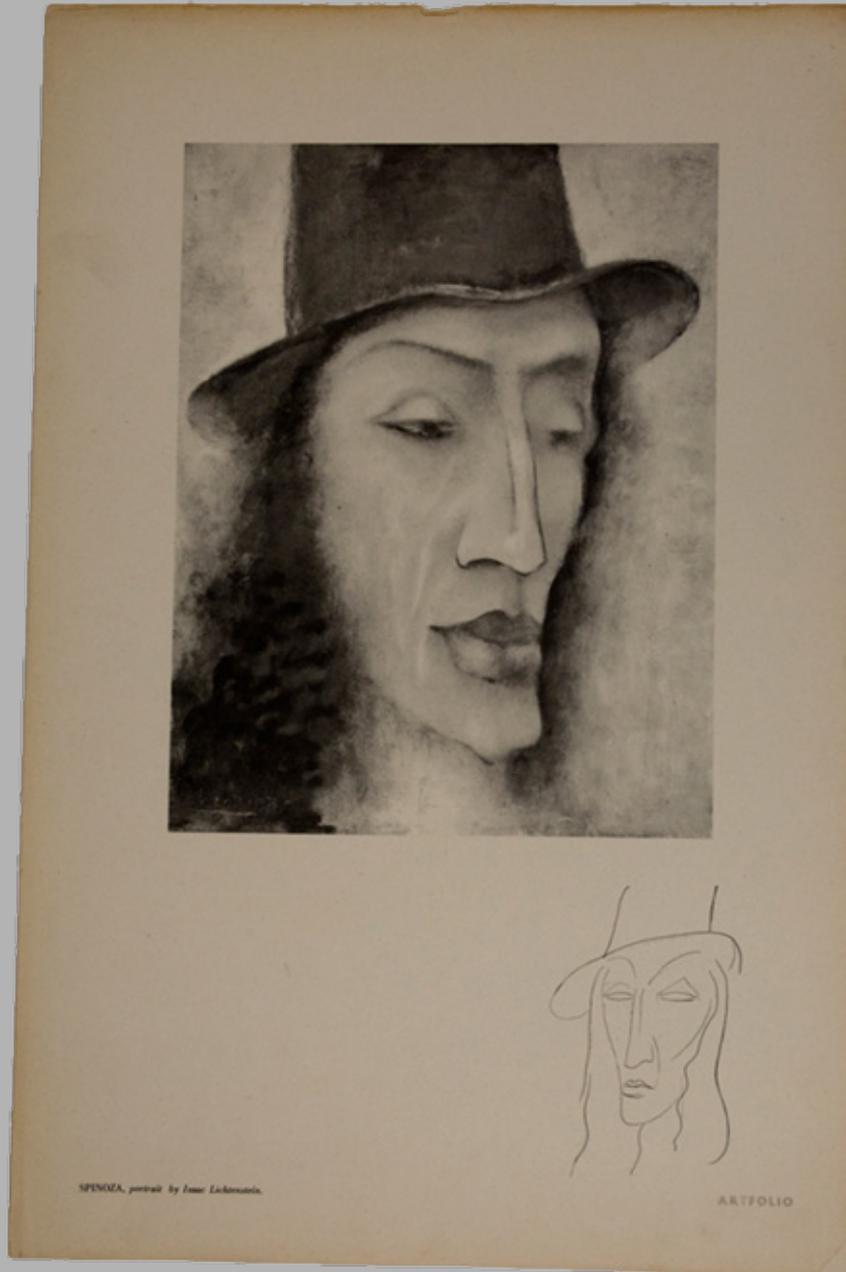


# Café Philosophy



Spinoza: black and white reproductions of paintings by Isaac Lichtenstein, published by Art Folio, New York, 1946 —  
Magnes Museum

SPINOZA: WHY HE STILL MATTERS	2
SPINOZA, THE MODERN-DAY RADICAL	3
SPINOZA, P1/ PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE	4
SPINOZA, P2 / MIRACLES AND GOD'S WILL	5
SPINOZA, P3 / WHAT GOD IS NOT	6
SPINOZA, P4 / ALL THERE IS GOD	8
SPINOZA, P5 / ON HUMAN NATURE	9
SPINOZA, P6 / UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONS	10
SPINOZA, P7 / ON THE ETHICS OF THE SELF	12
SPINOZA, P8 / READING THE ETHICS	13
SPINOZA'S GOD	14
EVERYBODY LOVES SPINOZA	16

# SPINOZA: WHY HE STILL MATTERS

The average Westerner has probably never heard of Spinoza. He is still one of the most important philosophers in European history. This year's final issue looks at Spinoza's legacy with insights from recently published books about this much-loved (but also maligned) figure who was, paradoxically, remembered as both both heretical and "God-intoxicated".

**Religious freedom:** As a Jew in 17th century Europe who rejected the infallibility of the Bible, young Spinoza found himself condemned by both the politically powerful Church and the rabbinical clerics. If he had been living somewhere less tolerant than relatively easygoing Amsterdam, Spinoza might have been executed. Such was the fate doled out to another Jewish teacher of many centuries prior who dared to challenge the religious authorities (and whose birth anniversary is fast approaching). Spinoza's writings on religious freedom may have indirectly influenced the founders of American democracy such as Thomas Jefferson, who ensured that religious freedom and the separation of church from state was integral to the US constitutional framework.

**All is one:** Spinoza's notion that everything is God, including the world, appeals to the growing demographic who consider themselves 'spiritual, not religious'. His is not the only philosophy to make such a claim, but he was one of the first to give it a systematic and rigorous exposition. The idea that the universe or Nature is divinely sacred and essentially whole is a compelling worldview for many who seek alternatives to traditional religion. A flurry of attention has recently been given to the so called "new atheists" (e.g. Dawkins, Hitchens) and their debate with theists. This debate often conceals the various alternative conceptions of God that don't fit into a narrow dichotomy. Spinoza's view has appeal for those who don't believe in an anthropomorphic deity, but are not satisfied with a universe that is empty of divine order and unity.

**Happiness is the goal:** For Spinoza, the real point of philosophy is to find true happiness. This approach makes philosophy an immensely practical pursuit. These days, people have an overwhelming demand for answers to life's problems, yet the study of philosophy at universities often seems disconnected from practical human strivings. The popularity of a recent Harvard course on how to be happy (also

known as 'positive psychology') and this year's declaration of an annual UN International Day of Happiness point to a growing focus on the importance of recognising emotional and spiritual needs. Spinoza believed that his philosophy, if properly understood and practiced, would give people the happiness they seek.

**It makes sense to be good:** Spinoza also believed that we could not be truly happy without living virtuously. It is often thought that good people are virtuous while bad people are self-centred. Spinoza believed that true self-interest can only be found in virtue. As we begin to understand our true nature and what really makes us happy, he thought we will be transformed into a state of 'blessedness' in which the motivation to act in unvirtuous ways will have departed. The idea that we can become good without holy books or an external punitive authority was radical at the time. If salvation is available from within and the essence of God is ultimately our own essence, then the role of a priest as 'middleman' between the individual and the divine seems a little redundant.

**Love rules.** According to Spinoza, the right kind of love can make us both virtuous and happy. In its highest form, this is what he calls the "intellectual love of God". Spinoza's disbelief in a personal God makes his notion of love peculiar. This has led some commentators to deny that he actually means love as we normally understand it, and to suggest it is more like a joyful appreciation and acceptance of all that the universe has to offer. Whatever it means, it gives us a different spin on love as not just an attachment to fleeting objects but an enduring state of being with the power to transform us for the better.

**Loneliness can be liberating.** Spinoza showed that you don't have to be under the wing of a big institution to have influential ideas – in fact it might be better not to. Spinoza was a pariah of the establishment, yet his works are still popular and engaging today. He wasn't a 'professional philosopher' but a tradesman, grinding lenses to pay his way so that he could philosophise how he wanted with no one else pulling his strings.

There are plenty of other reasons why Spinoza's views are still important, which is why the articles in here are worth a read. Liberties that we are in the habit of taking for granted such as democracy and freedom of conscience did not arise automatically, but were the result of great ideas followed by lots of hard work and struggle. This is why it is worth occasionally paying homage to those rare souls who had the audacity to think and act differently from the crowd, and in doing so altered the trajectory of humanity's progress.

# SPINOZA, THE MODERN-DAY RADICAL



You probably already know that 17th century Jewish philosopher **Baruch Spinoza** was radical for his time—from his notorious excommunication from the Amsterdam Jewish community at age 23 to his proclamation of "the end of Jewish politics," in his 1677 Theological-Political Treatise, which was written in Latin rather than vernacular Dutch to avoid censorship by Dutch authorities. But University of Chicago political scientist Julie Cooper recently extended Spinoza's rebel status into the present, defending the radical implications of his thought for Jewish identity and politics today at a lecture held earlier this month at the University of Chicago.

Spinoza remains, to this day, one of the most radical thinkers in Western philosophy and political theory. Condemning the religious superstition and government censorship of his time, Spinoza issued one of the earliest philosophical calls for freedom of thought and an ensuing emancipation from medieval tradition in a move toward liberal democracy. Even in his native Amsterdam—one of the most prosperous, enlightened and cosmopolitan cities in the world at the time—Spinoza was excommunicated from the Jewish community for "holding evil opinions," a charge often read as an accusation of atheism. Yet, in her talk, Cooper explained that it was actually relatively easy and common to repent and be readmitted to Jewish society. But Spinoza never even tried, nor did he convert to another religion. He was, as was almost unheard of in his day, a man free from religious and political association—a rebel.

In her talk, **Cooper** characterized Spinoza as the "theoretical harbinger of modern alternatives to rabbinic authority," **who first proposed the two models of Jewish political organization still dominant today:**

1) equal citizenship for Jews in secular democracy

2) a Jewish state. But Spinoza's radical argument is that neither of these options—the only options Jews have today—allows for "Jewish politics," which Spinoza deemed defunct.

But what would Jewish politics then look like? In the 17th century, most Jews in Western Europe lived in semi-autonomous Jewish quarters, which featured their own courts and leaders, and collected their own taxes—all in accordance with rabbinic law. This theocratic governance is, for Spinoza, the only kind of authentically "Jewish" politics, in that it maintains a Jew's status, qua Jew, as a political agent (which is lost in secular democracy in which he is equal to all others) and maintains rabbinic law (which he argues is lost under Jewish nationhood).

Spinoza's radical conclusion in the Treatise comes fundamentally from his reading of the Bible as a historical document, which he thought should be analyzed more like a natural artifact than a sacred message given at Sinai. By this interpretation, he saw the Bible's accounts of Jewish law and political history as historically relative—nothing more than the opinions held by its Jewish authors in the biblical era and no longer applicable to Jews living in later times. Spinoza then concludes on philosophical grounds (much like 20th-century figures like Emmanuel Lévinas) that the only binding Jewish obligations are those of morality and reason, thus declaring all other political and religious laws illegitimate. In proclaiming rabbinic law non-binding, Spinoza essentially wiped out the need for a rabbinic class of rabbis and judges—also the authorities of the Jewish polity. In turn, his view allowed, and even demanded, that individuals make moral and legal decisions for themselves.

While Spinoza praised Jewish leaders like Moses, he did so not for their status as religious figures, but out of respect for their political abilities. By Spinoza's reading, Moses masterfully used religion as a means of uniting the Israelites, then largely an uneducated class having been enslaved in Egypt, by appealing to their sense of wonder and organizing them around devotion to God, rather than fear of punishment. And so while earlier figures like Maimonides revered Moses for his spiritual or philosophical insight, Spinoza saw him primarily as an inspirational figure for Jewish politics. Similarly, Spinoza identified the Jewish people as "chosen" not in a metaphysical sense, but only insofar as they were politically successful. After the diaspora, this chosenness abated, though Spinoza envisioned the restoration of the Jewish state that would constitute its return.

Cooper noted that early Zionists held rallies at Hebrew University in honor of Spinoza—even going so

far as to call him the first Zionist. But the implications of Spinoza's writings for Jewish nationhood are mixed. While the return of Jews to political autonomy in a sense constituted a return to chosenness, Spinoza, ever wary of belief in the supernatural, made clear that the reestablishment of the Jewish state would have to be an entirely practical endeavor of human political and military means—thus making the state of Israel a nation just like any other and subject to the same political forces and moral laws. In this respect, Israel is only a Zionist state, not a Jewish one.

Ultimately, Spinoza's preferred option was Jewish assimilation into liberal democracy, for several reasons. First, he felt that Jewish self-imposed isolation provoked anti-Semitism and was ultimately self-defeating. Second, he had almost an unshakable Enlightenment-era hope that, under conditions of free speech, democracy and philosophy would be mutually reinforcing and ensure the most stable and natural form of organization for human beings. He envisioned liberal democracies like Amsterdam allowing Jews a safe space on account of their freedom of speech and religious expression. Furthermore, their egalitarian political representation also allowed Jews to participate in civil society as full citizens. Yet, despite these benefits, assimilation also spelled the end of Jewish politics.

Spinoza's radical thought anticipated for Jews an approaching fork in the road between democracy and Jewish politics that still remains to be confronted today. Alas, the vexed question of whether a Jewish polity can be both Jewish and democratic is older than you thought.

Jon Catlin

Jon Catlin studies modern Jewish thought at the University of Chicago. He is Editor of The Midway Review and a regular contributor to TheAir-space.net and Makom, a journal of Jewish studies.

*jUChicago was original publisher of this article.*  
[www.juchicago.tumblr.com](http://www.juchicago.tumblr.com)

(Treatise: A systematic, usually extensive written discourse on a subject.)

## SPINOZA, P1/ PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE



For this 17th century outsider, philosophy is like a spiritual practice, whose goal is happiness and liberation.

Although Baruch Spinoza is one of the great thinkers of the European philosophical tradition, he was not a professional scholar – he earned his modest living as a lens grinder. So, unlike many thinkers of his time, he was unconstrained by allegiance to a church, university or royal court. He was free to be faithful to the pursuit of truth. This gives his philosophy a remarkable originality and intellectual purity – and it also led to controversy and charges of heresy. In the 19th century, and perhaps even more recently, “Spinozist” was still a term of abuse among intellectuals.

In a sense, Spinoza was always an outsider – and this independence is precisely what enabled him to see through the confusions, prejudices and superstitions that prevailed in the 17th century, and to gain a fresh and radical perspective on various philosophical and religious issues. He was born, in 1632, to Jewish Portuguese parents who had fled to Amsterdam to escape persecution, so from the very beginning he was never quite a native, never completely at home. Although Spinoza was an excellent student in the Jewish schools he attended, he came to be regarded by the leaders of his community as a dangerous influence. At the age of 24 he was excluded from the Amsterdam synagogue for his “intolerable” views and practices.

## SPINOZA, P2 / MIRACLES AND GOD'S WILL

Spinoza's belief that miracles were an unexplained act of nature, not proof of God, proved dangerous and controversial.

At the heart of Baruch Spinoza's philosophy is a challenge to the traditional Judeo-Christian view of the relationship between God and the world. While the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures share a conception of God as the creator of the natural world and the director of human history, Spinoza argues that everything that exists is an aspect of God that expresses something of the divine nature. This idea that God is not separate from the world is expounded systematically in the Ethics, Spinoza's magnum opus. However, a more accessible introduction to Spinoza's view of the relationship between God and nature can be found in his discussion of miracles in an earlier text, the Theologico-Political Treatise. This book presents an innovative interpretation of the bible that undermines its authority as a source of truth, and questions the traditional understanding of prophecy, miracles and the divine law.

In chapter six of the Theologico-Political Treatise, Spinoza addresses the “confused ideas of the vulgar” on the subject of miracles. Ordinary people tend to regard apparently miraculous events – phenomena that seem to interrupt and conflict with the usual order of nature – as evidence of God's presence and activity. In fact, it is not just “the vulgar” who hold this view: throughout history, theologians have appealed to miracles to justify religious belief, and some continue to do so today.

For Spinoza, however, talk of miracles is evidence not of divine power, but of human ignorance. An event that appears to contravene the laws of nature is, he argues, simply a natural event whose cause is not yet understood. Underlying this view is the idea that God is not a transcendent being who can suspend nature's laws and intervene in its normal operations. On the contrary, “divine providence is identical with the course of nature”. Spinoza argues that nature has a fixed and eternal order that cannot be contravened. What is usually, with a misguided anthropomorphism, called the will of God is in fact nothing other than this unchanging natural order.

Spinoza's most famous and provocative idea is that God is not the creator of the world, but that the world is part of God. This is often identified as pantheism, the doctrine that God and the world are the same thing – which conflicts with both Jewish and Christian teachings. Pantheism can be traced back to ancient Greek thought: it was probably advocated by some pre-Socratic philosophers, as well as by the Stoics. But although Spinoza – who admired many aspects of Stoicism – is regarded as the chief source of modern pantheism, he does, in fact, want to maintain the distinction between God and the world.

His originality lies in the nature of this distinction. God and the world are not two different entities, he argues, but two different aspects of a single reality. Over the next few weeks we will examine this view in more detail and consider its implications for human life. Since Spinoza presents a radical alternative to the Cartesian philosophy that has shaped our intellectual and cultural heritage, exploring his ideas may lead us to question some of our deepest assumptions.

One of the most important and distinctive features of Spinoza's philosophy is that it is practical through and through. His ideas are never merely intellectual constructions, but lead directly to a certain way of life. This is evidenced by the fact that his greatest work, which combines metaphysics, theology, epistemology, and human psychology, is called Ethics. In this book, Spinoza argues that the way to “blessedness” or “salvation” for each person involves an expansion of the mind towards an intuitive understanding of God, of the whole of nature and its laws. In other words, philosophy for Spinoza is like a spiritual practice, whose goal is happiness and liberation.

The ethical orientation of Spinoza's thought is also reflected in his own nature and conduct. Unlike most of the great philosophers, Spinoza has a reputation for living an exemplary, almost saintly life, characterised by modesty, gentleness, integrity, intellectual courage, disregard for wealth and a lack of worldly ambition. According to Bertrand Russell, Spinoza was “the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers”. Although his ideas were despised by many of his contemporaries, he attracted a number of devoted followers who gathered regularly at his home in Amsterdam to discuss his philosophy. These friends made sure that Spinoza's Ethics was published soon after his death in 1677.

Clare Carlisle

Philosophy as a way of life by **Clare Carlisle**  
©First published in the Guardian Newspaper

From this it follows that God's presence and character is revealed not through apparently miraculous, supernatural events, but through nature itself. As Spinoza puts it: "God's nature and existence, and consequently His providence, cannot be known from miracles, but can all be much better perceived from the fixed and immutable order of nature."

Of course, this view has serious consequences for the interpretation of scripture, since both the Old and New Testaments include many descriptions of miraculous events. Spinoza does not simply dismiss these biblical narratives, but he argues that educated modern readers must distinguish between the opinions and customs of those who witnessed and recorded miracles, and what actually happened. Challenging the literal interpretation of scripture that prevailed in his times, Spinoza insists that "many things are narrated in Scripture as real, and were believed to be real, which were in fact only symbolic and imaginary".

This may seem reasonable enough to many contemporary religious believers, but Spinoza's attitude to the Bible was far ahead of its time. Today we take for granted a certain degree of cultural relativism, and most of us are ready to accept that ancient peoples understood the world differently from us, and therefore had different ideas about natural and divine causation. When it was first published in 1670, however, the Theologico-Political Treatise provoked widespread protest and condemnation. In fact, it was this reaction that made Spinoza decide to delay publication of the Ethics until after his death, to avoid more trouble.

But what are we to make of Spinoza's claim that God's will and natural law are one and the same thing? There are different ways to interpret this idea, some more conducive to religious belief than others. On the one hand, if God and nature are identical then perhaps the concept of God becomes dispensable. Why not simply abandon the idea of God altogether, and focus on improving our understanding of nature through scientific enquiry? On the other hand, Spinoza seems to be suggesting that God's role in our everyday lives is more constant, immediate and direct than for those who rely on miraculous, out-of-the-ordinary events as signs of divine activity.

And of course, the idea that the order of nature reveals the existence and essence of God leads straight to the view that nature is divine, and should be valued and even revered as such. In this way, Spinoza was an important influence on the 19th-century Romantic poets. Indeed, Spinoza's philosophy seems to bring together the Romantic and scientific worldviews, since

it gives us reason both to love the natural world, and to improve our understanding of its laws

## SPINOZA, P3 / WHAT GOD IS NOT

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza wanted to liberate readers from the dangers of ascribing human traits to God  
*Baruch Spinoza by Tea Moth*



Spinoza's *Ethics* is divided into five books, and the first of these presents an idiosyncratic philosophical argument about the existence and nature of God. We'll examine this in detail next week, but first we need to look more closely at how the *Ethics* challenges traditional Judeo-Christian belief in God.

The view that Spinoza wants to reject can be summed up in one word: anthropomorphism. This means attributing human characteristics to something non-human – typically, to plants or animals, or to God. There are several important implications of Spinoza's denial of anthropomorphism. First, he argues that it is wrong to think of God as possessing an intellect and a will. In fact, Spinoza's God is an entirely impersonal power, and this means that he cannot respond to human beings' requests, needs and demands. Such a God neither rewards nor punishes – and this insight rids religious belief of fear and moralism.

Second, God does not act according to reasons or purposes. In refusing this teleological conception of God, Spinoza challenged a fundamental tenet of western thought. The idea that a given phenomenon can be explained and understood with reference to a goal or purpose is a cornerstone of Aristotle's philosophy, and medieval theologians found this fitted very neatly with the biblical narrative of God's creation of the world. Aristotle's teleological account of nature was, then, adapted to the Christian doctrine of a God who made the world according to a certain plan, analogous to a human craftsman who makes artefacts to fulfil certain purposes. Typically, human values and aspirations played a prominent role in these interpretations of divine activity.

Spinoza concludes book one of the *Ethics* by dismissing this world view as mere "prejudice" and "superstition". Human beings, he suggests, "consider all natural things as means to their own advantage", and because of this they believe in "a ruler of nature, endowed with human freedom, who had taken care of all things for them, and made all things for their use". Moreover, people ascribe to this divine ruler their own characters and mental states, conceiving God as angry or loving, merciful or vengeful. "So it has happened that each person has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshiping God, so that God might love him above all others, and direct the whole of nature according to the needs of his blind desire and insatiable greed," writes Spinoza.

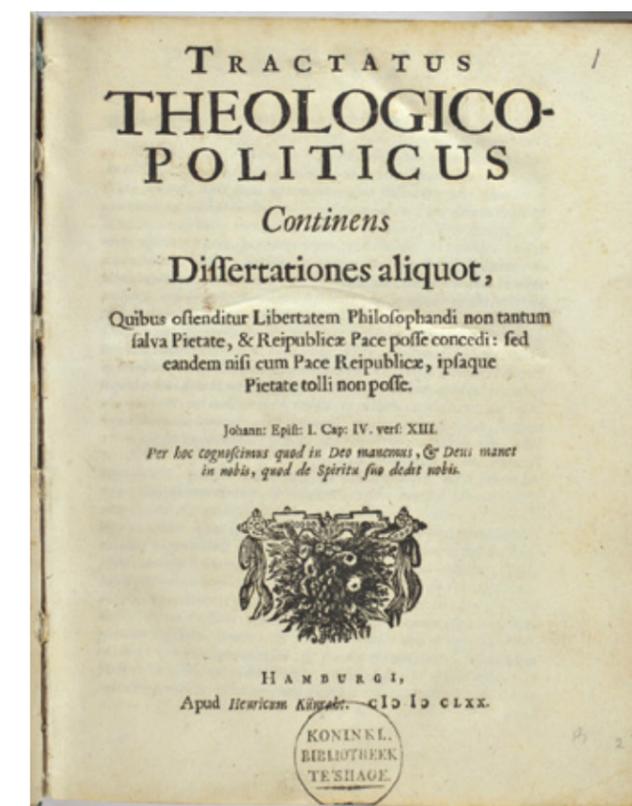
It is interesting to compare this critique of religious "superstition" with the views of the 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume challenges the popular belief in a creator God – and he also, elsewhere, undermines appeals to miracles as evidence of divine activity. Although Hume seems to echo Spinoza on these points, there is a crucial difference between the two philosophers. Hume thinks that many aspects of Christian belief are silly and incoherent, but his alternative to such "superstition" is a healthy scepticism, which recognises that religious doctrines cannot be justified by reason or by experience. His own position is rather ambiguous, but it involves a modest and pragmatic attitude to truth and seems to lead to agnosticism.

Spinoza, on the other hand, thinks that there is a true conception of God which is accessible to human intelligence. He argues that misguided religious beliefs are dangerous precisely because they obscure this truth, and thus prevent human beings from attaining genuine happiness, or "blessedness". There is, therefore, more at stake in Spinoza's critique of popular superstition than in Hume's. For Hume,

religious believers are probably wrong, but the existential consequences of their foolishness might not be particularly serious. Spinoza, by contrast, wants to liberate his readers from their ignorance in order to bring them closer to salvation.

So Spinoza is not simply an atheist and a critic of religion, nor a sceptical agnostic. On the contrary, he places a certain conception of God at the heart of his philosophy, and he describes the ideal human life as one devoted to love of this God. Moreover, while Spinoza is critical of superstition, he is sympathetic to some aspects of Jewish and Christian teaching. In particular, he argues that Jesus had a singularly direct and immediate understanding of God, and that it is therefore right to see him as the embodiment of truth, and a role model for all human beings.

Forged in Hell



Spinoza wrote and in 1670 published his Theological Political Treatise in defence of secular and constitutional government—While published anonymously, the work did not long remain so, and de Witt's enemies characterized it as "forged in Hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil, and issued with the knowledge of Jan de Witt." [60] It was condemned in 1673 by the Synod of the Reformed Church and formally banned in 1674. [61]

# SPINOZA, P4 / ALL THERE IS, IS GOD

Being infinite and eternal, God has no boundaries, argues Spinoza, and everything in the world must exist within this God

So far in this series I've focused on Spinoza's critique of the religious and philosophical world view of his time. But what does he propose in place of anthropomorphic, anthropocentric belief in a transcendent creator God?

Spinoza begins his Ethics by defining some basic philosophical terms: substance, attribute, and mode. In offering these definitions, he is actually attempting a radical revision of the philosophical vocabulary used by Descartes, the leading thinker of his time, to conceptualise reality. When we understand these terms properly, argues Spinoza, we have to conclude that there exists only one substance – and that this is God.

Substance is a logical category that signifies independent existence: as Spinoza puts it, “by substance I understand what is conceived through itself”. By contrast, attributes and modes are properties of a substance, and are therefore logically dependent on this substance. For example, we might regard a particular body as a substance, and this body is not conceptually dependent on anything else. But the body's properties, such as its weight and its colour and its shape, are qualities that cannot be conceived to exist in isolation: they must be the weight, colour and shape of a certain body.

Descartes's world view draws on Aristotelian metaphysics and scholastic theology in conceiving individual entities as distinct substances. Human beings, for example, are finite substances, while God is a special substance which is infinite and eternal. In fact, Descartes thought that each human being was composed of two substances: a mind, which has the principal attribute of thought; and a body, which has the principal attribute of extension, or physicality. This view famously leads to the difficult question of how these different substances could interact, known as the “mind-body problem”.

The philosophical terminology of substance, attribute and mode makes all this sound rather technical and abstract. But Cartesian metaphysics

represents a way of thinking about the world, and also about ourselves, shared by most ordinary people. We see our world as populated by discrete objects, individual things – this person over here, that person over there; this computer on the table; that tree outside, and the squirrel climbing its trunk; and so on. These individual beings have their own characteristics, or properties: size, shape, colour, etc. They might be hot or cold, quiet or noisy, still or in motion, and such qualities can be more or less changeable. This way of conceptualising reality is reflected in the structure of language: nouns say what things are, adjectives describe how they are, and verbs indicate their actions, movements and changing states. The familiar distinction between nouns, adjectives and verbs provides an approximate guide to the philosophical concepts of substance, mode and attribute.

If, as Spinoza argues, there is only one substance – God – which is infinite, then there can be nothing outside or separate from this God. Precisely because God is a limitless, boundless totality, he must be an outsideless whole, and therefore everything else that exists must be within God. Of course, these finite beings can be distinguished from God, and also from one another – just as we can distinguish between a tree and its green colour, and between the colour green and the colour blue. But we are not dealing here with the distinction between separate substances that can be conceived to exist independently from one another.

Again, this is rather abstract. As Aristotle suggested, we cannot think without images, and I find it helpful to use the image of the sea to grasp Spinoza's metaphysics. The ocean stands for God, the sole substance, and individual beings are like waves – which are modes of the sea. Each wave has its own shape that it holds for a certain time, but the wave is not separate from the sea and cannot be conceived to exist independently of it. Of course, this is only a metaphor; unlike an infinite God, an ocean has boundaries, and moreover the image of the sea represents God only in the attribute of extension. But maybe we can also imagine the mind of God – that is to say, the infinite totality of thinking – as like the sea, and the thoughts of finite beings as like waves that arise and then pass away.

Spinoza's world view brings to the fore two features of life: dependence and connectedness. Each wave is dependent on the sea, and because it is part of the sea it is connected to every other wave. The movements of one wave will influence all the rest. Likewise, each being is dependent on God, and as a part of God it is connected to every other being. As we move about and act in the world, we affect others, and we are in turn affected by everything we come into contact with.

This basic insight gives Spinoza's philosophy its religious and ethical character. In traditional religion, dependence and connectedness are often expressed using the metaphor of the family: there is a holy father, and in some cases a holy mother; and members of the community describe themselves as brothers and sisters. This vocabulary is shared by traditions as culturally diverse as Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. For Spinoza, the familial metaphor communicates a truth that can also be conveyed philosophically – through reason rather than through an image.

Clare Carlisle

Philosophy as a way of life by **Clare Carlisle**  
©First published in the Guardian Newspaper

# SPINOZA, P5 / ON HUMAN NATURE

We are not autonomous individuals but part of a greater whole, says Spinoza, and there is no such thing as human free will.

We have examined Spinoza's metaphysics, looking at how his radical reinterpretation of the philosophical terminology of substance, attribute and mode produces a new vision of reality. According to Spinoza, only God can be called a substance – that is to say, an independently existing being – and everything else is a mode of this single substance. But what does this mean for us?

One of the central questions of philosophy is: what is a human being? And this question can be posed in a more personal way: who am I? As we might by now expect, Spinoza's view of the human being challenges commonsense opinions as well as prevailing philosophical and religious ideas. We are probably inclined to think of ourselves as distinct individuals, separate from other beings. Of course, we know that we have relationships to people and objects in the world, but nevertheless we see ourselves as autonomous – a view that is reflected in the widely held belief that we have free will. This popular understanding of the human condition is reflected in Cartesian philosophy, which conceives human beings as substances. In fact, Descartes thought that human beings are composed of two distinct substances:

a mind and a body. For Spinoza, however, human beings are not substances, but finite modes. (Last week, I suggested that a mode is something like a wave on the sea, being a dependent, transient part of a far greater whole.) This mode has two aspects, or attributes: extension, or physical embodiment; and thought, or thinking. Crucially, Spinoza denies that there can be any causal or logical relationships across these attributes. Instead, he argues that each attribute constitutes a causal and logical order that fully expresses reality in a certain way. So a human body is a physical organism which expresses the essence of that particular being under the attribute of extension. And a human mind is an intellectual whole that expresses this same essence under the attribute of thinking.

But this is not to suggest that the mind and the body are separate entities – for this would be to fall back into the Cartesian view that they are substances. On the contrary, says Spinoza, mind and body are two aspects of a single reality, like two sides of a coin. “The mind and the body are one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension,” he writes in book two of the Ethics. And for this reason, there is an exact correspondence between them: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” In fact, each human mind involves awareness of a human body.

This way of thinking has some important consequences. One of the most obvious is that it undermines dualistic and reductionist accounts of the human being. Descartes's mind-body dualism involves the claim that we are, in essence, thinking beings – that the intellectual should be privileged above the physical, reason above the body. Conversely, modern science often regards the human being as primarily a physical entity, and attempts to reduce mental activity to physical processes. In Spinoza's view, however, it is incoherent to attempt to explain the mental in terms of the physical, or vice versa, because thinking and extension are distinct explanatory orders. They offer two alternative ways of describing and understanding our world, and ourselves, which are equally complete and equally legitimate.

Another important consequence of Spinoza's account of the human being is his denial of free will. If we are modes rather than substances, then we cannot be self-determining. The human body is part of a network of physical causality, and the human mind is part of a network of logical relations. In other words, both our bodily movements and our thinking are constrained by certain laws. Just as we cannot defeat the law of gravity, so we cannot think that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , or that a triangle has four sides.

Spinoza's criticism of the popular belief in free will is rather similar to his analysis of belief in miracles in the Theologico-Political Treatise, which we looked at a few weeks ago. There, we may recall, he argued that people regard events as miraculous and supernatural when they are ignorant of their natural causes. Likewise, human actions are attributed to free will when their causes are unknown: "That human freedom which all men boast of possessing ... consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined." For Spinoza, belief in free will is just as much a sign of ignorance and superstition as belief in miracles worked by divine intervention

## SPINOZA, P6 / UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONS

By understanding our emotions, whether positive or negative, we gain in power and therefore happiness, argues Spinoza

In the third book of the Ethics, Spinoza writes that he intends to consider human emotions "as if the surfaces of lines, planes or solids". Because the emotions are just as natural and as law-governed as all other modes, he suggests, they can be studied with mathematical precision. And this means that human behaviour, so often motivated by emotion, must be completely intelligible and explicable.

Spinoza criticises people who, believing "that man rather disturbs than follows the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions", tend to adopt a misguided moralistic attitude. "They refer the cause of human weakness and inconstancy not to the common forces of universal nature, but too, I know not what vice in human nature, which they therefore bewail, deride, despise, or more frequently detest." Spinoza thought that it was more fruitful to understand our emotions and actions than to hate or ridicule them.

According to Spinoza, we understand something fully when we know what causes it, and how. From the perspective of his philosophy this is rather a tall order, since everything is connected, and therefore the causes of any particular phenomenon are highly complex. In fact, understanding something ultimately means knowing the whole of which it is a part – in other words, knowing God.

However, Spinoza approaches the task of understanding human emotions by a more accessible route. His first step is to draw a basic distinction between activity and passivity: "I say that we are active when something takes place within us or out of us, of which we are the adequate cause, ie when from our nature something follows either within us or out of us, which can be clearly understood by that nature alone. On the other hand I say that we are passive when something takes place in us or follows from our nature, of which we are only the partial cause." This doesn't conflict with Spinoza's denial of free will, which we looked at last week. When we are active we are determined by our own nature, while when we're passive we are determined, to some extent, by something (or someone) else.

Spinoza then asserts that every individual thing strives to persevere in its existence. In order to live, we need power, or energy, and because various external influences can diminish our power, we seek not only to sustain this power, but to increase it. Spinoza calls such striving conatus (a Latin term meaning will or appetite), and he argues that this conatus "is nothing but the actual essence of the thing". By using the traditional concept of essence in this idiosyncratic way, Spinoza gives it a new sense of activity and dynamism. In his philosophy, "what a thing is" becomes identical with its power, its energy, its force of life.

A finite individual's power: the mind's power of thought, and the body's power of movement – fluctuates over time. Spinoza suggests that the emotion of joy arises with the feeling of an increase in power,



and the emotion of sadness arises when power is diminished. This means that our endeavour to persist in being is simultaneously a pursuit of joy, or pleasure. Whatever increases our power makes us happy, and this leads us to value it as good.

Spinoza regards joy and sadness as the two basic emotions, and he suggests that all other emotional states are variations of these, combined with ideas of particular objects that cause them. For example, love is a feeling of joy – and hatred a feeling of sadness – joined with an idea of its cause. Spinoza emphasises that such feelings may well have more to do with the imagination than with reality: the person I love may in fact weaken my essence – especially if this love is anxious or obsessive – even though I mistakenly believe that he or she enhances my life.

An important feature of Spinoza's account of emotions is that both joy and sadness, and also their variations, can be either active or passive, depending on whether or not the individual is aware of them and understands them clearly. As we have seen, understanding involves knowledge of causation: we need to figure out what gives rise to different feelings – and this might be a complex combination of external influences and things that follow from our own nature. Without such knowledge, we simply suffer our emotions, but understanding them has a transformative effect: "An emotion which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it." When the mind knows thoroughly even a painful emotion such as sadness or grief, its

activity of knowing signals an increase of power, which generates a feeling of joy. Spinoza is suggesting here that understanding is inherently joyful, regardless of its object.

In his thinking about the emotions, Spinoza is influenced by older philosophical traditions – in particular, by the moral theories of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. But he also ends up sounding rather modern, too, for his emphasis on understanding the causes of our emotions resonates with various forms of psychotherapy, and even with some contemporary self-help literature. If everyone is seeking to increase their own power, then helping other people to flourish must mean empowering them to become more active, rather than treating them as passive recipients of charity or therapy. Perhaps Spinoza is attempting to empower his own readers in precisely this way – although the Ethics is certainly not your average self-help manual.

However, in its modern form, this kind of ethic of self-empowerment and life-enhancement is often tied to an individualistic way of thinking. For Spinoza, on the contrary, the idea that we are separate, autonomous beings is a key target of his philosophical critique. Next week, in turning to the question of morality and the good life, we'll think about how to reconcile Spinoza's claim that every being pursues its own happiness and seeks to maximise its power, with his insistence that we are all connected to one another.

Clare Carlisle

Philosophy as a way of life by **Clare Carlisle**  
©First published in the Guardian Newspaper

The Nature park and recreation area het Twiske is located northwest of Amsterdam. Twiske-mill on the background is octagonal binnenkruier windmill of which the inside works is movable, built around 1572, probably visited at some point by Baruch Spinoza. The photo is by Ben the Man. [www.flickr.com/photos/visbeek/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/visbeek/)

# SPINOZA, P7 / ON THE ETHICS OF THE SELF

For Spinoza the main hurdle to virtue isn't egoism but ignorance of our true nature – by being selfish we can in fact help others

Unlike many other philosophers, Spinoza does not think that living an ethical life involves overcoming our natural self-centredness. For Spinoza, the main obstacle to virtue is not egoism, but ignorance of our true nature. When we are subject to strong emotions, which we attribute to imagined causes, we are unlikely to act in a way that is good for ourselves, or for other people. Add to this our misguided belief in free will, and the messy, antagonistic reality of human relationships seems inevitable.

Last week we considered some of the implications of Spinoza's concept of conatus – the striving to persevere in existence, and to enhance its own power, that constitutes the essence of every individual being. This, of course, applies to human beings as much as to everything else. But if we are fundamentally self-interested, as this idea of conatus seems to suggest, then where does this leave morality?

This problem is compounded by the fact that, in Spinoza's philosophy, the self-interested character of human beings is linked to what looks like moral relativism. When we examined the doctrine of God set out in the first book of the Ethics, we saw that Spinoza challenges the traditional religious idea that God rewards virtue and punishes vice, and this gave an early indication that he does not share with more conventional 17th-century thinkers their belief in a moral universe. And in the fourth book of the Ethics, he is very clear that "good" and "evil" are not intrinsic values: "As far as good and evil are concerned, they indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another." For Spinoza, we should understand the terms "good" and "bad" as analogous to "healthy" and "unhealthy": value is a question of what is good for me, or bad for me.

Spinoza argues here that "one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent". He illustrates this point by suggesting that music is good for someone who is depressed,

bad for someone who is in mourning, and indifferent for someone who is deaf. In denying absolute moral values, Spinoza looks very much like a precursor of Nietzsche, who is well known for his criticism of morality – and, indeed, Nietzsche's view that we need to move "beyond good and evil" to a less moralistic understanding of value is clearly influenced by his reading of the Ethics.

However, we shouldn't conclude that Spinoza thinks values are merely subjective, in the sense of being relative to the desires, opinions and prejudices of each individual. In fact, he would emphatically reject such a view. Whether or not something is good for an individual – that is to say, whether or not it increases her power, enhances her life – is not a matter of opinion. Indeed, we may well be mistaken about what is good for us, and so our believing something to be valuable does not make it so. This means we come back to a notion of objective value: even if this varies from person to person and from context to context, it is nevertheless objectively true that, in each particular situation, something will be beneficial or harmful.

This is why, for Spinoza, knowledge and understanding must lie at the heart of a good human life. As we saw last week when we examined his theory of the emotions, we become active, and so enhance our own power, when we thoroughly understand our feelings and behaviour. And these notions of activity and power are inseparable from what we might still call moral virtue, so long as we do not associate the word "moral" with absolute value. Spinoza insists that "the more each person strives, and is able, to seek his own advantage, the more he is endowed with virtue; conversely, insofar as each one neglects his own advantage, that is, neglects to preserve his being, he lacks power".

Furthermore, Spinoza argues that when we seek what is genuinely to our advantage – as opposed to what we merely believe is good for us – we enhance the being of others as well as ourselves. Like Socrates in the Republic, he suggests that there isn't really a conflict between self-interest and morality, between egoism and altruism. This is because all human beings share something deeply in common: beneath the surface of diverging and conflicting ideas, emotions, tastes, inclinations and prejudices, our true nature is constituted by reason, which grasps the way in which everything in the universe is connected.

And so Spinoza sums up his account of virtue like this: "the more each one seeks his own advantage, and strives to preserve himself, the more he is endowed with virtue, or what is the same, the greater is his power of acting according to the laws of his

own nature, that is, of living from the guidance of reason. But men most agree in nature when they live according to the guidance of reason. Therefore, men will be most useful to one another, when each one most seeks his own advantage."

It's important to clarify that Spinoza isn't talking here about a narrowly intellectual kind of reason. Intelligence in the sense of cleverness is at least as likely to separate people as to bring them together – and being clever certainly doesn't correlate with being virtuous, happy and empowered. Rather, Spinoza has in mind a deeper, more spiritual kind of wisdom, which involves what we today call "emotional intelligence", and self-awareness, as well as an understanding of how every being is part of a greater whole

# SPINOZA, P8 / READING THE ETHICS

In this final installment, how the Ethics is not just a philosophical treatise, but also a training manual for a philosophical way of life.

In this series we've examined several elements of Spinoza's philosophy, including his critique of traditional religious doctrines, his metaphysics of human life, his theory of human emotions, and his account of virtue. However, very little has been said of the distinctive philosophical method and literary style of his great work, the Ethics – and so in this final instalment I want to address this issue.

The Ethics differs from Spinoza's earlier writings in following the pattern of Euclid's Elements – and, indeed, its method is often described as "geometrical". Beginning with axioms and definitions, Spinoza elucidates step by step, in a series of interlinked numbered propositions, the tenets of his philosophy.

The deductive, quasi-mathematical structure of Spinoza's argument makes the Ethics rather daunting to first-time readers. It can seem cold and impersonal, lacking the intimate, confessional tone of Descartes' Meditations, or the dramatic, conversational style of Plato's dialogues. But in fact, Spinoza chose the geometrical method precisely because he wanted to communicate with his readers in a direct and profound way. He wanted his book to make a real difference, not

just to how people thought, but to how they lived.

The argumentative method of the Ethics, with its frequent cross-references between its axioms, definitions, propositions and demonstrations, reflects a basic principle of Spinoza's thought: that everything in the universe is connected. As we have seen over the last few weeks, finite individuals – including human beings – are not separate, autonomous substances, but modes of the single substance that can be called God or Nature. As such, every being is part of a larger whole, and can only be properly known when its place within that whole is grasped. And we have found that, for Spinoza, this kind of knowledge is the basis of a good, virtuous human life.

But how exactly are things connected? What is the "order and connection of ideas" that Spinoza speaks of – and how are we to know this order?

Spinoza recognised that, as empiricist philosophers have argued, we learn about the world through our experience of it. And these experiences vary: depending on all sorts of factors, each of us encounters different things, in different orders. Over the years, each person's imagination and memory develops according to a complex web of associations and meanings, and this shapes the way they think. As Spinoza puts it:

"Each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one's association has ordered the images of things in the body. For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plough, and then to that of a field, and so on. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another."

So habit or custom produces a certain order of ideas in a person's mind. But this order is based on fortuitous experiences and encounters – we often don't plan these experiences, but find that they just happen to us out of the blue. They certainly depend on where and when we happen to be born, and on how we are brought up. These subjective orderings of ideas are, of course, quite different to how things in the world are really ordered and connected. According to Spinoza, the true order and connection of ideas is known not through experience and habit, but through reason.

This brings us back to the deductive, geometrical structure of the Ethics. In this text, claims about the

nature of reality follow a strict logical order. Spinoza doesn't tell us a story about how he developed his philosophical vision during the 1660s; instead, he lets that vision unfold according to its own rational structure. He believed that by reading the Ethics – something that requires a good deal of time and effort – people would gradually retrain their minds to follow its logical structure. Instead of letting their thoughts be ordered by habit, custom and imagination, they would become increasingly enlightened about the true order of things.

As we have seen over the last few weeks, Spinoza identified certain customary beliefs as especially misleading: for example, the ideas of a creator God and of free will, and the view that each person is a distinct substance, sufficient unto himself. It is precisely these entrenched habits of thinking that are targeted in the Ethics. This suggests that the book is not just a philosophical treatise, but also a kind of training manual for the philosophical way of life – and therefore reading it is a transformative spiritual exercise. As readers attain a deeper understanding of the text, their own activity of thinking should come to replace passive acceptance of prevailing superstitions and prejudices. And, Spinoza tells us, this transition from passivity to activity is always empowering, liberating and joyful.

#### Clare Carlisle

©First published in the Guardian Newspaper

This 8 part series on the life of Baruch Spinoza was written by Dr. Clare Carlisle a teacher of philosophy and was first published by the Guardian Newspaper, U.K.

## SPINOZA'S GOD

A cosmos in the mind of the harmonious philosopher.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) has long appealed to skeptics and secularists. In the 18th century, "Spinozism" was a synonym for atheism. Shelley channeled him in his own arguments for atheism, George Eliot translated him, Hegel and Marx admired him, and he was one of Nietzsche's favorite philosophers. Yet in his major philosophical works, he can hardly stop talking about God, whose existence never seems to be in doubt—prompting the German poet Novalis, one of the many Romantic poets enchanted with him, to call him "that God-intoxicated man."

Einstein's answer to a New York rabbi clears things up a bit. The rabbi cabled him in 1929 to ask him if he believed in God. Einstein replied, "I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings."

It's clear what Spinoza's God is not. He isn't the God of the Bible, the personal God of Spinoza's own Jewish tradition, or of Christianity, the one whose job description includes closely monitoring human affairs and miraculously intervening in them. What he is isn't so clear.

Spinoza used the provocative formulation *Deus sive natura*—"God, or nature"—but he actually regarded nature as just the visible, comprehensible aspect of God's infinite, incomprehensible being. One consequence is that everything that happens in nature, and everything that nature's lawful order dishes out to us personally, is necessary—the way the conclusion of a logical or mathematical demonstration is necessary.

Everything is determined, not by God's will—He doesn't have one—but by our being, with everything else, an integral part of God's being. Nothing happens by chance. And there are no miracles. Asking God for one, asking that He suspend natural law for our benefit, is asking God to trip up God. But once we recognize this inexorable order as God's only providence, we arrive at a serene acceptance of the world, combined with a virtuous immunity to its petty distractions and snares, thus partaking of the true freedom which belongs to God.

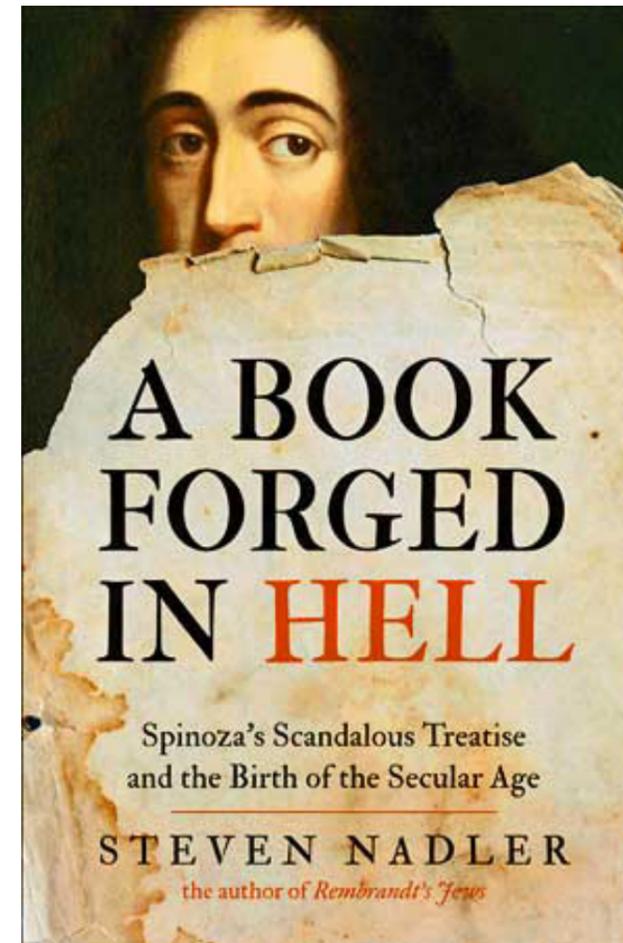
Pantheistic mysticism? Cold deterministic rationalism? His readers have been arguing the point for centuries, and are still arguing. Spinoza first made his views generally known in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, published anonymously in Latin in 1670 but quickly attributed to him. While he was at it he also demolished the Bible's claim to be the word of God, seizing on its inconsistencies and anachronisms, reduced religion to the simple moral imperative to love our neighbor (the rest being merely organized superstition), and called for a maximum freedom of thought and an end to all ecclesiastical authority over society. The book was a bit too much for tolerant but still Calvinist Holland, where it was denounced as blasphemous and dangerous.

Steven Nadler's lucid book about Spinoza's shocking book takes its title from a contemporary pamphlet that described it as "a book forged in hell." Nadler's own book was forged in Madison, where he is a professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin. He has also given us *Spinoza: A Life*

(1999), and both books are illuminating contributions to a recent surge of interest in the philosopher that includes Rebecca Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza* and Matthew Stewart's *The Courtier and the Heretic*.

Nadler does an excellent job of summarizing Spinoza's sometimes convoluted arguments in the *Tractatus* and making clear how original they were, stressing his departures from influences like Maimonides, Descartes, and his older contemporary Hobbes, whose tough-minded *raison d'état* realism he adopted in the political part of the book before steering toward unheard-of democratic conclusions. He shows how modern biblical criticism and the broad Enlightenment program for a secular, scientific society were effectively launched in the book. And he gives us the historical context of Dutch Golden Age politics and culture, which usually allowed the tolerant cosmopolitanism of its merchant class to prevail over clerical indignation. Elsewhere Spinoza might have been jailed or burned at the stake, but in Holland he was left alone—if sometimes by fiat.

At the age of 23 he was formally excommunicated, and cursed, by Jewish authorities in Amsterdam,



where he had been raised in a Portuguese-Jewish family, probably for heretical ideas overheard in his conversations. His fellow Jews were thereafter forbidden to speak to him or even go near him. Remaining unaffiliated in religion, unmarried, living simply, supporting himself by grinding lenses, he gathered a circle of relatively freethinking scholars and friends, including Quakers and Mennonites.

The *Tractatus*, Nadler points out, is a more readable and urgent book than his posthumously published magnum opus, the *Ethics*, with its rigorously Euclidean, axiomatic format, but the books have a common aim: "liberation from bondage, whether psychological, political, or religious."

Exactly. There is, after all, that famous chapter head in the *Ethics*, "Of human bondage, or the strength of the emotions." In the *Tractatus* Spinoza compares the arbitrary divine power exercised in the Bible to "the rule of some royal potentate." He wants to liberate us from a heavenly despot whom we abjectly petition for miraculous favors or reprieves, from clerics who claim to be his agents and intermediaries, and from the powerful and capricious emotions, especially hope and fear, that those clerics exploit. Unlike the ancient Stoics whom he somewhat resembles, Spinoza thought emotions are best taken care of when they are fully understood, not when they are fully extinguished. Freedom means minimizing our emotional subjection to things outside ourselves.

Of course, you may still wonder if his deterministic nature, which has no room for free will, just exchanges one form of bondage for another. And you may hear Voltaire's jibes in *Candide*, aimed at Spinoza's contemporary Leibniz, bouncing off Spinoza as well. If everything comes from God just being God, then all would seem to be for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and our calamities are, so to speak, simply divine. But that's why secularist readers (Nadler among them) have always seen Spinoza's God as a thin disguise for an orderly, perhaps awe-inspiring, but purposeless and indifferent nature. And why we're less interested now in Spinoza's logic than in his peace of mind.

Nietzsche wrote that he had "deified the All and Life in order to find peace and happiness in the face of it." Nietzsche tried something like this, too, with his *amor fati*, love of fate, but with conspicuously less serene results. Spinoza seems to have feared nothing and regretted nothing, and he lived a life of quiet, exemplary virtue. On the last day of his life, before his death at the age of 44 from lung disease, he was calmly conversing with his friends about philosophy, the same as always.

Like Einstein, we can likely use some of his soothing sense of cosmic harmony, whether or not we pay it the compliment of calling it Spinoza's God.

#### Lawrence Klepp

January 23, 2012, Vol. 17, No. 18

This article first appeared in the *Weekly Standard*

Lawrence Klepp is a writer in New York.

[http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/spinoza-s-god\\_616715.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/print/articles/spinoza-s-god_616715.html)

## EVERYBODY LOVES SPINOZA

**Atheist Jew, champion of modernism, and kind and sociable man, the 17th century lens grinder who was "drunk on God" continues to win hearts and minds with his breathtaking philosophical vision.**

Bertrand Russell declared the 17th century lens grinder Baruch Spinoza to be "the noblest and most loveable of the great philosophers." To judge from several recent books, he's not alone in that opinion. The neurologist Antonio Damasio made the philosopher's thought a keystone of his 2003 book on emerging theories of emotion and consciousness, "Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain." In "Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity," philosophy professor and novelist Rebecca Goldstein declares herself to have loved Spinoza since the first time she heard him decried in the Orthodox yeshiva high school she attended as a girl. Matthew Stewart, a management consultant turned freelance historian of philosophy, makes Spinoza the supreme champion of modernism in his tale of intellectual rivalry, "The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God in the Modern World." Even Einstein, when asked if he believed in God, replied, "I believe in Spinoza's God."

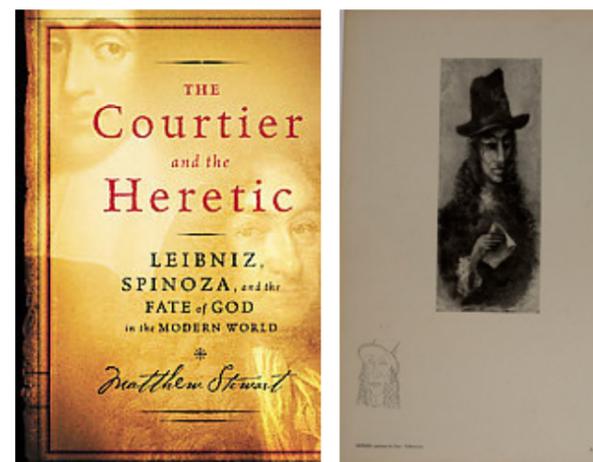
All this is strange, when you observe, as Goldstein does, that Spinoza's ideas, from the perspective of contemporary analytic philosophy ("the philosophic tradition toward which I gravitate"), are considered "not just unsubstantiated speculations, but highfalutin nonsense." Surveying Spinoza's view of existence, Russell declared "the whole of this metaphysics is

impossible to accept; it is incompatible with modern logic and with scientific method." Stewart characterizes Spinoza's thought as exhibiting a forbiddingly "eerie self-sufficiency." And in his own time and for decades afterward, Spinoza was widely denounced as (according to one church leader) "that insane and evil man, who deserves to be covered with chains and whipped with a rod." Yet however obsolete, ridiculous or even blasphemous, Spinoza still speaks to modern thinkers with an immediacy no philosopher of his time can match.

Of the two most recent books on this once-infamous "atheist Jew," Stewart's is the more wide-ranging and entertaining and Goldstein's is the more elegant; both are splendid. Goldstein (whose book belongs to a series of short volumes on Jewish thought) wants to reclaim Spinoza's famously dismissive attitude toward notions like ethnic identity as a paradoxically Jewish position. Stewart wants to vaunt him as a prophet of liberal secularism.

Many are those who can be accused of betraying Spinoza, including the Jewish community of his native Amsterdam, who excommunicated him in his early 20s. Then there's Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the brilliant German polymath who, as Stewart tells it, spent his whole life being influenced by and reviling Spinoza. You might, then, suspect Goldstein to be referring to these or other contemporaneous betrayals in her title. But what Goldstein gracefully acknowledges is that her own project to characterize Spinoza's philosophy as distinctly Jewish, though inspired by "love," amounts to another betrayal. The aspects of Spinoza's life that we consider fascinatingly personal — his religious and ethnic background, his habits and relationships, his family history and quirks — were qualities Spinoza himself dismissed as mere ephemera and illusion. To write about Spinoza's own life as if it matters is, in a way, to betray him.

Still, there's something about Spinoza the man that led people to love him, then and now — even though his own work mostly avoids autobiographical intrusions and even though he would have frowned on such considerations. Although he was regarded as a dangerous heretic in his own time and refrained from publishing his final works for fear of provoking serious problems, Spinoza's funeral, as described by Stewart, was "an impressive event. Six state carriages led the procession, and many persons of high social rank attended along with the philosopher's numerous admirers. Notwithstanding his solitary ways and international notoriety, it seems, the sage of The Hague had developed quite a following among his fellow citizens."



Despite what Goldstein deems his "reptilian detachment" from the personal, little details of Spinoza's life manage to convey why he might have been so popular even when his ideas were often so detested. Goldstein herself decided that Spinoza was "loveable" when she learned that, as a young man, the philosopher kept his religious skepticism to himself until after his father's death, in order to prevent his own apostasy from troubling his parent. Whatever his beliefs about the irrelevance of individual identity, Spinoza was a kind and sociable man. His landlord's Christian family, for example, was devoted to him, supplying him with his simple meals and even locking him inside the house on one rare occasion when Spinoza intemperately tried to confront his fellow citizens about a recent act of mob violence.

"When he needed to take a break from his philosophical labors," Stewart writes, "the apostate Jew would descend to the parlor and chat with his house companions about current affairs and other trivia. The conversation often revolved around the local minister's most recent sermon. On occasion the notorious iconoclast even attended church service in order to better participate in the discussion." Spinoza did not believe in God as any church of his time would have defined the deity, and he considered most organized religions to be vehicles of deceit and oppression. But when his landlord's wife told him she was worried she'd picked the wrong church, he reassured her it was fine: "You needn't look for another one in order to be saved," he said, "if you give yourself to a quiet and pious life."

By the standards of his day, Spinoza was an atheist. (He insisted he was not, but his notion of "God" is one that even today many people would find overly abstract.) As Stewart notes, his contemporaries were much confused by the philosopher's character, since atheists were assumed to be depraved, amoral hedonists whose impulses were completely

unrestrained by any threat of punishment in the afterlife. (This is still a common idea, especially among those raised in authoritarian religions. The comedian Julia Sweeney, in her one-woman show about losing her Catholic faith, describes fearing that without a belief in God she and others would run around stealing things and killing people.)

Spinoza, however, was no reprobate, although he was made to suffer for his beliefs. He never married, and after being excommunicated, he was forced to give up his position in his family's business, since all members of the Jewish community were forbidden to speak with him, including his own relatives. He lived an exemplary, modest life, supporting himself grinding lenses (a highly skilled trade) and turning down various commissions and allowances that he deemed either too extravagant or likely to impinge on his intellectual freedom. "Unlike some other philosophers," Russell writes, "he not only believed his own doctrines, but practiced them; I do not know of any occasion, in spite of great provocation, in which he was betrayed into the kind of heat or anger that his ethic condemned. In controversy he was courteous and reasonable, never denouncing, but doing his utmost to persuade." Many who knew him considered him a kind of saint.

Of course, even saints — perhaps especially saints and everyone else who seems above fractious, ordinary human travails — can be insufferable. And yet Spinoza, apparently, was not, even if Stewart tries to convince us that the philosopher had a certain infuriating, supercilious look that he unleashed on rare occasions and that revealed how little he thought of most people's intellectual powers. The love so many people feel for Spinoza, like all love, is a bit of a mystery, and it should be added that love itself was not something Spinoza particularly endorsed, with the sole exception of what he called "the intellectual love of God." This love, the only real form of, in Spinoza's words, "continuous, supreme and unending happiness," can be attained by applying oneself to the pursuit of reason, the apprehension — however human and therefore imperfect — of the infinite and perfect cathedral of laws and logic that is, for him, the essence of God.

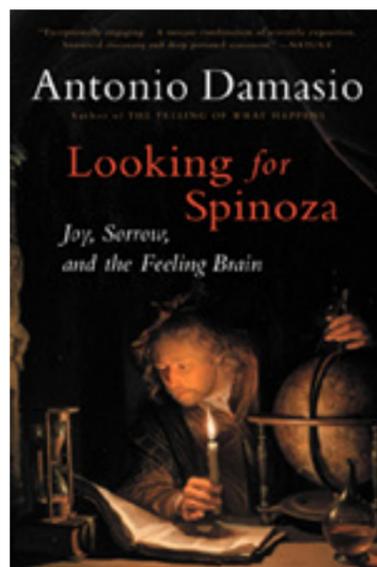
Surely one reason so many thinkers remain smitten with Spinoza is the fabled beauty of his vision of the universe and God. Goldstein, a professor of philosophy at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., writes of seeing her students transformed by Spinoza's "Ethics." At first, they're put off by the "eccentricity — both in form and content — of this impenetrable work." But eventually, they make "their way into Spinoza's way of seeing things, watching the entire world reconfigure itself

in the vision ... One feels oneself change, however, impermanently, as one beholds Spinoza's point of view — the point of view that approaches, though it can never match, 'the Infinite Intellect of God.' One's whole sense of oneself, and what it is one cares about, tilts — in a direction that certainly feels like up. Year after year, I've watched what happens with my students when Spinoza begins to take hold, and it's always moving beyond measure."

Although Spinoza's vision is ultimately "unsustainable," it does sound breath-taking. Goldstein's description reminds me of a passage in Neal Stephenson's historical novel "Quicksilver," in which a fictional character has an intimation about a friend, a real genius and contemporary of Spinoza's: "[He] experienced a faint echo of what it must be like, all the time, to be Isaac Newton: a permanent ongoing epiphany, an endless immersion in lurid radiance, a drowning in light, a ringing of cosmic harmonies in the ears."

What makes Spinoza's philosophy unsustainable in Goldstein's view is the fact that "in its ruthless high-mindedness, it asks us to renounce so many passions. (Among the passions we must renounce is romantic love, which, Spinoza deduces, will almost always end badly...)" Any love that is dependent on something that must inevitably change and cannot truly be possessed — such as another person — Spinoza explains, is asking for trouble. With a dazzling comprehensiveness, the philosopher seemed driven to topple every species of sacred cow. Anyone who isn't disturbed by his refusal to believe in the conventional notion of God as a person will surely be put off by his skepticism about the secular religion of our own time, true love.

Key to Spinoza's heresy was his monism, his belief that everything that exists is essentially a single thing, "nature" (that is, the infinite universe), and that this is identical with God. (As a girl, Goldstein was taught that Spinoza wickedly equated God with nature, when Jews and Christians agreed that God is supernatural, outside of nature, and a person.) Everything we experience — people, events, objects — is simply a "mode" of that single "Substance" or essence. Because God/Nature is infinite and we are finite, we perceive these things to be separate when they are not; all separate identities, including our own individuality, are merely an illusion or misperception. We perceive good and evil when neither really exists, from the perspective of God. The only way we can come to understand the true unity of the world is through the understanding of pure reason, which is integral to Substance in the same way that roundness is integral to a circle.



We can't fully grasp this — our minds aren't adequate to the task — but with a dash of intuition, we can glimpse it and experience Spinoza's notion of true happiness. We can then attain what Goldstein calls a "radical objectivity," a perspective that's outside of our own limited identity. This objectivity will enable us to see the insignificance of our own pains, pleasures

and losses except insofar as they help or hinder our ability to reason. We will realize that a life of restraint and peaceful coexistence with our fellow man is exactly what will sustain us in this cause; self-interest and virtue will be revealed as identical. Finally, we will be able to regard with tranquility the fact that we are mortal, that our minds, like our bodies, are simply a mode of the great infinity of Substance, and will someday end.

While Spinoza was no Puritan — he believed that pleasure, when properly understood, guides the philosopher toward self-preservation and the path of reason — he did advise the renunciation of "passions," that is, any powerful emotion that interferes with the enlightened self-interest epitomized by a life of virtue and the pursuit of reason. Yet, strangely enough, he was admired by many of the Romantics of the 19th century, who were votaries of individualism and overpowering emotion. If his contemporaries called him an atheist, the German romantic poet Novalis would later swoon over this "God-intoxicated" visionary. It seems that everyone tends to see in Spinoza what they find most compelling.

No surprise then that Goldstein's young students, preoccupied with their own love lives, will suggest that "there must have been some woman who broke his heart" and caused Spinoza to take such a dim view of romance. There have been some feeble rumors to this effect, but they don't convince Goldstein, who "cannot quite condone" this sort of speculation. "If there's some missing element of biography that must be summoned in order to explain the philosopher's vision of radical objectivity, his abjuring any love other than that for objectivity itself, I very much doubt it lies in disappointed romantic love. If it lies anywhere, it's in Jewish history. Spinoza has forsworn the Jew's love

of that history. That was the love that was too heart-breaking to bear."

As Goldstein sees it, Spinoza developed a philosophy that renounced identity because his Jewish identity was too painful, both in his own excommunication and in the history of his people, the Sephardic Jews. Much of "Betraying Spinoza" follows the history of this people, beginning with a golden age in the tolerant, culturally sophisticated, Muslim-ruled Spain of the early Middle Ages. When European Christians finally regained control of Spain in the 15th century, a bloody campaign of persecution and eventually expulsion against Spanish Jews began. Spinoza was descended from Sephardim who were driven by the Inquisition out of Spain and into Portugal, and eventually out of Portugal to Amsterdam.

Spinoza, Goldstein suspects, could no longer countenance the Jews' insistence on their status as the people chosen by God and their efforts to reconcile this belief with the seemingly endless sufferings they had endured. According to Spinoza's philosophy, the idea of a special or chosen people is absurd — even the idea that humanity constitutes some special category of creation, in fact even the idea of creation is absurd. Spinoza's vision of the world as "the all-embracing web of necessary truths, intelligible through and through," countered the Jewish notion of a God of arbitrary laws and murderous rages and kabalistic fantasies of unfathomable mystery. In effect, Goldstein is claiming that the fact of Spinoza's Jewishness makes itself most felt in the way his philosophy seems custom-designed to refute the premises of Judaism as he knew it.

For Stewart, on the other hand, Spinoza's Jewishness is an ancillary issue. He sees the philosopher as a fundamentally political thinker. Looking around him, at the prospering and religiously tolerant Dutch Republic, Spinoza formulated a vision of the ideal state as a secular, democratic authority that ensured what he christened "freedom of conscience." Spinoza's "advocacy of democracy on the basis of individual rights was extraordinarily bold for its time," Stewart writes, "and it qualifies him as the first truly modern political philosopher." This aspect of Spinoza's work would eventually influence the British philosopher John Locke, who was in turn a major influence on the creators of the U.S. Constitution. In a way, Spinoza was a proto-American.

Stewart is so taken with this aspect of Spinoza's legacy that he makes the not very credible claim that it is the true root of the philosopher's thought. "Inasmuch as Spinoza's God is easier to understand in the negative — that is, in terms of what it is not: a personal, providential, creator deity — than in

the positive — what it is — then to that extent his political commitments would seem to be prior to his philosophy. That is, his metaphysics would be intelligible principally as the expression of his political project, to overthrow theocracy."

If only we could always assume that the easiest part to understand in a philosopher's work is also the most important part! A Spinoza whose dearest goal is to overthrow theocracy and ensure the freedoms of a democratic secular state is certainly more appealing nowadays than the one who insists on his own weird, impersonal, indifferent "God" and the supremacy of reason over passion. But it seems more likely that Spinoza's quest to discover the nature of reality came first, and that it was the efforts of various religious authorities to squelch his questions and ideas that led him to conceive of the ideal of a secular, tolerant state.

Likewise, a Spinoza who honored his Jewish heritage enough to devote his life to transcending it seems more sympathetic than a Spinoza who cold-bloodedly tossed it out as a collection of absurd superstitions and tribal delusions of grandeur. Both versions of Spinoza — the crusader for freedom of conscience and the tragic Jewish intellectual — humanize the philosopher in ways congenial to our modern principles of liberal individualism. And certainly Spinoza, as both Goldstein and Stewart point out, is one of the prophets of modernism.

But there is also Spinoza's materialism, which makes him a "protobiologist" in Damasio's view, and perhaps a deterministic proto-Darwinian to others. Some might see the philosopher's advocacy of "radical objectivity" as harmonious with the Buddhist doctrines of non-attachment — even if Spinoza's geometrically derived rationalism has little in common with the mind-emptying practice of meditation. Maybe someone will even eventually come along to admire the philosopher's "ruthless high-mindedness." For reasons that may always remain an enigma, when we look deep into Spinoza's (famously beautiful) eyes, what we see is very often a reflection of ourselves, perhaps even our best selves. If Spinoza was right about the universe, he's not around (anywhere) to either appreciate the irony of this or to rail against our solipsism. And that's just one more reason for us to love him so much.

#### Laura Miller

Laura Miller is a senior writer for Salon. She is the author of "The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia" and has a Web site, [magiciansbook.com](http://magiciansbook.com). This article first appeared in Salon.com, at <http://www.salon.com/archives>.

Reprinted with permission.

# Café Philosophy



At the Shelf Café, 50 High Street, Auckland, I met Bren (left) and Leilani. They told me they'd just been to the "California Design, 1930- 1965: Living in a Modern Way" exhibition at the Auckland Art Gallery and were full of praise for the 1960s swimsuit style by Mary Ann DeWeese. They also mentioned that they liked the Shelf Café because of its natural food and interior design features which they said were modelled on a café in Stockholm

## Cafe Philosphy

---

**TEL: 09-377-6270**

**CAFEPHILOSPHY@XTRA.CO.NZ**

**P.O BOX, 47-781, PONSONBY, AUCKLAND**

Design//Shirlee X  
shirlee.x.design@gmail.com