

Spinoza Reconsidered

Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* Oxford University Press

By Ann Talbot
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I last reviewed Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* on this site in 2001 just after it came out in hardback. Why return to it now? The book itself would justify another review since it is a large and rich work that delves deeply into early Enlightenment history and repays reading and rereading. There is always something more to find in it. A first impression of such a book will inevitably represent a limited judgement and fail to do it complete justice. It is also now out in paperback.

But it would be more honest to say that having wrestled with it for two years, during which time I have tested Israel's arguments in a truly combative spirit, I find that I have to return to the book and reconsider some of the points that I made, possibly too hastily, then.

Most history books, even good ones, once they are read and digested, sit quietly on the shelf to be consulted occasionally for some fact or other, until they are displaced by a more recent work. This is not such a book. My second review of it is the fruit of some long, hard arguments—with the historical sources, with myself, with Israel in absentia, and with other people who have felt the pull of this book and its central character, the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch or Benedict Spinoza, whom Israel argues played a far more central role in the development of Enlightenment ideas than is generally accepted.

If you take the Number 31 bus from Leiden the driver will put you off at Spinoza's house in Rijnsburg, where he lived from 1660 to 1663. I doubt that the same is true of any other seventeenth century philosopher. You could not ask such directions to Thomas Hobbes' house and certainly not John Locke's house in Essex, since it has been knocked down. Sir Isaac Newton's house in Lincolnshire is preserved but it is to be found by only the most zealous enthusiast with a map.

The zealotry lies partly in the character of Dutch society but also in the character of Spinoza himself, who is capable of exercising a gravitational attraction even over the distance of three centuries.

Yet for all his immense worldwide intellectual presence, Spinoza remains enigmatic. This is partly a function of the historical records and their preservation, but in a more significant sense is not a strictly historical problem at all since it reflects the extent to which, in exploring Spinoza's thought, we are examining the modern world and conceptions of the most current relevance. It is as though the beneficent god in which Spinoza did not believe had granted him a glimpse of the future which he is conveying to us. To some degree this is a feature of the seventeenth century when many of the natural philosophers seem to have an unsettling capacity to project us forward in time because science was in a state of flux and everything seemed possible to them so that their work has a visionary and utopian character. But with Spinoza we seem to be dealing with a man who was not of his own era.

We are experiencing a remarkable upsurge in interest in Spinoza's life and ideas as the twentieth century has given way to the twenty-first. Steven Nadler produced a life of the philosopher in 1999, and Margaret

Gullan-Whur's *Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza*, came out in 2000, Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* explores the relevance of his ideas for modern neuroscience. A number of new books are due out this year and next, continuing the revival of interest. This is in marked contrast to the situation a few decades ago when Samuel Shirley's proposed new translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* was rejected by all the publishers he approached as "commercially unviable." He has now brought out a new translation of Spinoza's complete works. Shirley was inspired in this marathon task by the conviction that Spinoza had "a vision of truth beyond what is normally granted to human beings."

Historically such Spinoza revivals are not unknown. Germany experienced an explosion of interest in Spinoza during the 1780s, immediately prior to the French Revolution. Almost overnight he went from being condemned as the worst of atheists and blasphemers to being universally admired by all the leading intellectuals of the day, who found in Spinoza's works a revolutionary spirit that matched their own mounting sense of rebellion against the orthodoxies of church and state. The German experience would tend to suggest that a revival of enthusiasm for Spinoza has previously been the harbinger of a change in social consciousness. For that reason the present fascination with Spinoza and his ideas has a profound significance.

When I reviewed the *Radical Enlightenment* two years ago I took issue with Israel's treatment of John Locke, whom he regards as a representative of a moderate strand in Enlightenment thought rather than the politically and philosophically radical tradition stemming from Spinoza. While I still have reservations on that point, which I shall discuss in a subsequent article, it seems to me that the positive aspects of Israel's analysis of Spinoza are far more significant than I then allowed and outweigh any criticism I might want to make of his estimation of Locke.

What are the key points that Israel makes about Spinoza?

Firstly, Israel emphasises that Spinoza was part of an international ideological movement. It has become customary to view the Enlightenment from various national perspectives, so that we have the French Enlightenment, the German Enlightenment or the Scottish Enlightenment. In rejecting this approach Israel is standing out against the prevailing academic attitude to the Enlightenment in which each national tradition has its own source material, its own secondary sources and its own body of professional specialists. And in doing so he finds a coherence that the period often lacks in other more national oriented treatments.

This was an age when natural philosophers travelled and corresponded internationally and regarded themselves as part of a global Republic of Letters. It does not lend itself to a national perspective and to study it in that way inevitably distorts its character and gives a false impression of

the nature of the ideological influences of the period. Yet even as their own world becomes ever more integrated that is what most historians do.

Secondly, Israel makes it clear that Spinoza was a materialist philosopher, who rejected Descartes dualism between body and soul and instead regarded the whole of nature, including mankind, as consisting of a single substance. For Spinoza, man's thinking, just as much as his bodily nature, is a property of substance and is not the activity of an immaterial soul that animates the body as it was for many of his contemporaries. Israel's account of Spinoza's ideas is one of the clearest available and he makes a philosophical system that is often opaque, because it is presented in the form of a geometrical proof and is expressed in a theological manner, much more accessible to the modern reader.

Thirdly, what is important about Israel's book is that he draws out the connection between revolutionary ideas in science and philosophy and revolutionary ideas in politics. It has been argued, for example by the historian Robert Darnton, that the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers were not connected with opposition to the *ancien regime* and that the state was more concerned to ban illicit erotica than the writings of serious philosophers like Spinoza. Israel corrects this impression, identifying Spinoza as the "first major European thinker in modern times to embrace democratic republicanism as the highest and most rational form of political organisation," in which all men were equal.

These three interlinked themes of the international character of the movement of which Spinoza was a part, the importance of his materialist outlook and the revolutionary political implications of his philosophy run through Israel's book, providing a remarkably comprehensive overview of the early Enlightenment with important insights that could not be gained by a less organically integrated perspective.

He traces the Enlightenment to "the unprecedented intellectual turmoil which commenced in the mid-seventeenth century," and was associated with the scientific advances of the early seventeenth century, especially those of Galileo. These scientific advances gave rise to "powerful new philosophical systems" producing a profound struggle between "traditional, theologically sanctioned ideas about Man, God, and the universe and secular, mechanistic conceptions which stood independently of any theological sanction."

The predominant intellectual strand in the new philosophy was Cartesianism and, while the followers of Descartes seldom intended to undermine theology and the hegemony of the church to the extent that they did, the "New Philosophy breached the defences of authority, tradition, and confessional theology fragmenting the old edifice of thought at every level from court to university and from pulpit to coffee-shop."

Viewed within a national framework it is very difficult to see a coherent connection between these scientific and philosophical ideas and the political upheavals of the mid-seventeenth century. Israel identifies a broad international context within which the political ideas associated with this intellectual movement developed, rather than tracing a single national current of ideas. He suggests that the Fronde in France and the Masaniello rising in Naples were just as important in terms of their influence on European consciousness as the English Civil War. He points out that while the revolutionary impetus faded away in Britain during the later seventeenth century and did not reappear until the end of the eighteenth century a very different form of republicanism was developing on the continent that was essentially urban and commercial in outlook rather than basing itself on the political role of the landed gentry, as in Britain. It was this continental tradition that was to find expression in Jacobinism and the French Revolution.

No historian has tracked Spinoza's influence so thoroughly as does Israel, who identifies its impact in British deism, on Vico's historicism, and French materialism as well as its more obvious influence in Germany during the 1780s.

Israel rejects the notion that British Deism was an essentially insular phenomenon and regards the British Deists such as John Toland (1670-1722) as deriving their ideas primarily from Spinoza. If the British Deists produced little that was original this was not the case with the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who put forward theories of historical development and language that were so original they seem uncannily ahead of their time. Israel identifies some of Vico's key ideas as distinctly Spinozist. While he is overtly critical of Spinoza, Vico takes a secular view of history, as does Spinoza, which for neither man depends upon divine intervention. Again like Spinoza, Vico regards religion as arising from the irrational fears and drives of humanity. Spinoza argued that religions arose by a natural psychological process as men imagined that the world had been designed for their benefit by a ruler or rulers and attempted to influence these powerful beings when destructive and disturbing natural events were seen as evidence of divine wrath. He considered that religious leaders used apparent miracles to establish a hold over the minds of the credulous.

Spinoza's denial of miracles and the supernatural was one of the most disturbing aspects of his philosophy for conventional thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet one of the most liberating and productive for those with a more progressive turn of mind since it freed them from a great weight of cultural tradition. It was above all in Germany that this aspect of Spinozism had its greatest impact. To follow that impact in full would have taken Israel far beyond the compass of his book into the age of Goethe and a consideration of Spinoza's influence on Hegel in the wake of the controversy over Spinozism known as the Pantheismusstreit in the 1780s. What Israel does, however, is to trace the earlier stages of Spinoza's influence in Germany before that public controversy broke out and in doing so he links up the history of European thought from Spinoza to Marx in a much more coherent way than was previously possible.

Israel is also able to identify the much more covert influence of Spinoza on the Enlightenment in France and the French Revolution. Although the Encyclopédie condemned Spinoza's philosophy as a "monstrous system," its editor Diderot was exploring the very same materialist ideas. Rousseau was not a Spinozist and rejected materialism, believing that the universe must be guided by a wise and powerful will, but Israel argues he developed his ideas in the course of a dialogue with Spinozism and, despite his opposition to Spinoza's materialism, shared certain conceptions with him, such as his conviction that the common will is the only possible criteria for judging a political system and that political actions must be determined by what serves the interests of society as a whole.

While Spinoza was seldom cited as an inspiration by the leaders of the French Revolution they were aware, Israel points out, that "egalitarianism, republicanism, and morality without Revelation were the fruits of a long process, engineered by an army of thinkers and writers stretching back for over a century." Spinoza was undoubtedly in the vanguard of this army, since as Robespierre said, "the secret of liberty is to enlighten men as that of tyranny is to maintain their ignorance." And, although his influence was often expressed in antagonism as much as agreement, Spinoza was responsible for defining the content and terms of that process of enlightenment.

The portrait of Spinoza that emerges from Israel's pages is perhaps more complete than that which a biography could provide because the significance of many of his ideas did not become apparent until long after he died in 1677. In tracing his ideas through European thought over the next century Israel offers us a comprehensive view of Spinoza's historical role as the philosopher who was as responsible as any one person could be for the revolution in consciousness that was necessary before the French revolution could take place. Israel writes, "A revolution of fact which demolishes a monarchical courtly world embedded in tradition, faith, and

a social order which had over many centuries the distribution of land, wealth, office, and status seems impossible, or exceedingly implausible, without a prior revolution in ideas—a revolution of the mind—that had matured and seeped its way through large sections of society over a long period before the onset of the revolution in actuality.”

Spinoza gave an immense impetus to that revolution of the mind and is still doing so. Israel indicates why that is the case when he explains that Spinoza’s theory of a single substance allowed him to recognise that “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” This is Spinoza’s proposition seven in part II of the *Ethics*. It is, Israel notes, “a difficult and challenging assertion which the modern reader is hardly likely to accept without serious question.” But it is at the very centre of Spinoza’s materialism and it is important that Israel draws attention to it as he does and avoids any tendency to “correct” Spinoza in the light of modern philosophical conceptions that are to one degree or another derived from Kant who did not recognise this necessary connection between thought and things.

While philosophers may be uncomfortable with Spinoza’s materialist theory of knowledge Antonio Damasio, as a scientist researching into the working of the human brain, finds in it a vital insight. Damasio notes that “by refusing to ground mind and body on different substances, Spinoza was serving notice of his opposition to the view of the mind-body problem that prevailed in his time... more intriguing, however, was his notion that the human mind is the idea of the human body... Spinoza might have intuited the principles behind the natural mechanisms responsible for the parallel manifestations of mind and body.”

Proposition seven takes us to the heart of the enigma that is Spinoza. It contains the archaic theological and geometrical form of Spinoza’s thought, being an axiomatic statement that is part of a geometrical proof and follows logically from a discussion of God as an extended and thinking thing, while at the same time it is thoroughly modern in content. It is also the key to understanding why Israel’s book will not sit quietly on the shelf.

Great history books are always based on a profound understanding of the original source material they rely on, but they are also relevant to the time in which they are written and illuminate the issues that are most significant to the society that produces them precisely because “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”. As a result the questions that seem relevant to the serious researcher in examining historical source material will in some way reflect those matters that are crucial to his own society even before they reach a conscious level and animate widespread public debate.

A history book is in that sense part of the development of ideas and of social consciousness of its own time as much as a work of science, philosophy, economic or political analysis could be said to be. Israel uses his enormous scholarship to establish the revolutionary significance of Spinoza’s ideas in challenging the position of an entrenched wealthy elite and he shows the power of those ideas to transform society in a revolutionary way when they become a social force in the minds of the mass of the population. Reading his book we get a shock of recognition despite the obvious historical differences between then and now, because he identifies the issues of social equality and the development of revolutionary consciousness as crucial to our understanding of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And in doing so he reflects what are the critical issues of the twenty-first century too. This gives his book an enduring relevance and ensures that it will come to be regarded as one of the great history books that acquire classic status.

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