
THE BLESSINGS OF SPINOZA

SPINOZA'S MODERNITY: MENDELSSOHN, LESSING AND HEINE

By Willi Goetschel

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004

Pp. x + 351. \$29.95, ISBN 0-299-19084-6.

SPINOZA'S REVELATION: RELIGION, DEMOCRACY AND REASON

By Nancy Levene

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004

Pp. xix + 256. \$75.00, ISBN 0-521-83070-2.

SPINOZA'S HERESY: IMMORTALITY AND THE JEWISH MIND

By Steven Nadler

New York: Oxford University Press, 2001

Pp. xix + 225. \$19.95, ISBN 0-19-926887-8.

SPINOZA AND THE IRRELEVANCE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

By J. Samuel Preus

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001

Pp. xiii + 228. \$75.00, ISBN 0-521-80013-7.

SPINOZA'S BOOK OF LIFE: FREEDOM AND REDEMPTION IN THE ETHICS

By Steven Smith

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003

Pp. 256. \$25.00, ISBN 0-300-10019-1.

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Bertrand Russell's Ciceronian summation of Spinoza's career is unsurpassed in its elegant compression:

Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was considered, during his lifetime and for a century after his death, a man of appalling wickedness. He was born a Jew but the Jews excommunicated him. Christians abhorred him equally; although his whole philosophy is dominated by God, the orthodox accused him of atheism. (569)

But here, as elsewhere, Russell glossed over difficult questions, both philosophical and biographical. Spinoza's metaphysical and political teachings must first be understood before we can determine whether and in what respects they have been surpassed, and this has never been as easily accomplished as Russell implied. What, most fundamentally, does it mean to speak of *Deus sive Nature*, God or Nature, and, relatedly, of human beings (as well as everything else) as completely describable under both the attributes of thought and extension? Does this metaphysical doctrine have any implications for democratic practice, or vice versa? Less subtly but no less importantly, what is the relation between the theological and the political in Spinoza's *Tractatus*? Finally—and this is the biographical question addressed in Steven Nadler's

ingenious and provocative little book—why, exactly, was Spinoza excommunicated?

Whether Spinoza has been surpassed or not ("Every philosopher," Hegel famously remarked, "has two philosophies, his own and Spinoza's"), he is certainly the most widely discussed of the great early modern philosophers at the moment. The books under review, which are only a small sample of the current crop of Spinoza books, address these and related questions from a variety of disciplinary methodological angles.

I

Spinoza's Book of Life is Steven Smith's second book about Spinoza. His first, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*, focused on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, and made a striking and persuasive case for its contemporary relevance. The "book of life" is, of course, *The Ethics*. The title is meant to surprise. Proverbs describes Wisdom as "a tree of life to them who grasp her" (Prov 3 : 18), and rabbinic liturgy famously applied this to the Torah. Smith, who notes that *The Ethics*, like the Pentateuch, is composed of five books, admits that Gilles Deleuze was right to describe the book as a kind of "anti-bible." Nevertheless, he insists that *The Ethics* is thoroughly Jewish in its radical monotheism, even if it ultimately undermines Judaism, along with its institutional competitors. Moreover, despite that destructive intent—and Smith follows Strauss in reading Spinoza as a thoroughgoing atheist rather than the nondenominational "Gott betrunken Mensch" of Romantic dispensation—he interprets Spinoza's message as ultimately one of hope. In short, *The Ethics* is a still-relevant book of life for an enlightened polity. (Smith's interpretation is Straussian, but without the angst, a partial consequence, perhaps, of the differing fortunes of the Weimar Republic and the United States.)

Smith sees Spinoza's *Ethics* as a founding attempt to provide "the psychology and ethics of a democratic soul," and he celebrates the enterprise. This is an interesting and fruitful approach, as far as it goes, but God (or Nature) is in the details, and here Smith's analysis often flies rather high above the philological and argumentative landscape. Two related examples will have to suffice. Early on, Smith discusses the central doctrine of Spinoza's metaphysics. The third definition in the first part of *The Ethics* famously states:

By substance, I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing from which it has been formed.

Of this definition, Smith writes,

Spinoza announces his break with the ancient and medieval philosophical traditions. For Aristotle with whom the debate about substance essentially begins, the concept of substance indicated the rational form or shape of any species. . . . Accordingly there were as many substances as there were species in Aristotle's polyglot universe. (38)

This is more or less true, but it obscures Spinoza's complex relationship to the Aristotelian tradition and, in particular, to the great twelfth-century Aristotelian Moses Maimonides. At the outset of his *Book of Knowledge*, Maimonides defines the sense in which his readers ought to believe in a divine being:

There is a first being, which brings into existence all which exists . . . and if it were supposed that this being did not exist,

nothing else could exist. However if it were supposed that all beings but it existed, it alone would still exist. (reviewer's translation)

In short, Spinoza's substance is Maimonides's God, the Aristotelian First Being, made immanent. So, far from breaking with the medieval Aristotelian tradition, Spinoza might better be understood as carrying the inner logic of this position to its most radical conclusion. Smith is, of course, familiar with the classic work of Harry Wolfson on Spinoza's complex indebtedness to the medieval tradition as well as the important corrections and further findings of Warren Harvey and others, but they play no role in his exposition, to its detriment.

The main concern of *Spinoza's Book of Life* is not in questions of being, as such, but rather in the impact of metaphysical arguments and doctrines on religion and politics. In this respect, Spinoza's thoroughgoing determinism with regard to human agency is a crucial issue, and Smith devotes a chapter to it. In it he claims that Spinoza's determinism is not incompatible with a chastened sense of human freedom. This certainly keeps with Spinoza's intentions, but I am not sure that Smith has come to terms with just how modest Spinoza's freedom may have been. In opposition to Isaiah Berlin's interpretation, Smith writes,

It is not because we have a will but because we possess intelligence . . . that we are free agents. It is by virtue of our possession of a reflective consciousness capable of conceiving, imagining, wishing and doing that we are free. To say, as Spinoza does, that freedom and determinism are compatible is not to assert that human beings follow the same causal patterns as nonhuman objects. (80)

Perhaps. But, unfortunately, Smith never moves very far beyond this assertion to substantive philosophical argument. Yet I am far from alone in thinking that it is a central feature of our moral reflection that—precisely at the moment of reflection—our action is not yet determined. I think practical syllogisms (to return to Aristotelian terminology) have causal force, at least sometimes. In this regard, it is striking that Smith chooses not to quote Spinoza's famous response to an earnest, worried Tschirnhaus on freedom:

Conceive, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that as far as it can it strives to continue to move. Of course since this stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe itself to be free, and to persevere in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. And this is that human freedom which everyone brags of having, and which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. (Letter 58)

To think otherwise, Spinoza says again and again, would be to imagine that human beings are "an empire within an empire," autonomous and apart from the causal network of nature. But this would be to suppose that man was a substance, whose concept is entirely self-sufficient. Nor does Smith's footnote of Donald Davidson's related arguments for his position of "anomalous monism" help. In the first place, as Smith's Yale colleague Michael Della Rocca has shown, Davidson and Spinoza's positions differ in important respects. In the second, Smith does not tell us in what respect he finds Davidson's arguments persuasive, and how it tallies with Spinoza's position.

I do not claim that Smith has no reply to such objections. Certainly Stuart Hampshire (who Smith quotes but does not truly employ) thought that there was a philosophically and exegetically

satisfying middle position to be found in Spinoza. My criticism is that too often in this book Smith sketches the outlines of an interesting position on Spinoza's behalf, but fails to fill it in or truly engage and answer potential criticisms. On the other hand, it should be noted that Smith is a graceful and lucid writer and his emphasis on the "theological-political" context of even Spinoza's most difficult metaphysical doctrines is useful and redresses an imbalance in the literature.

II

There could hardly be a greater contrast between Smith's determination to read Spinoza as an author with something vital to teach us about modernity and the late J. Samuel Preus's interpretive project in *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*. Readers of this journal are likely to know Preus's work on the historical origins of modern biblical criticism and, especially, the critical study of religion, from his influential *Explaining Religion from Bodin to Freud*. In this book (his last), Preus employed the contextualist approach of early modern intellectual historians such as J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, whose great methodological manifesto, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," was directed, in part, against Straussian readings of Spinoza, Hobbes, and others. Skinner insisted that the first and primary task of historical interpretation was to reconstruct the immediate lexical and rhetorical context of a work, rather than constructing a transhistorical dialogue between widely separated thinkers and ourselves.

Preus follows this approach to great effect. In doing so, he uncovers a politically charged debate over the practice of biblical interpretation among Spinoza's contemporaries, and interprets the *Theological-Political Treatise* as directed, at least in the first place, at moving—or perhaps, better, *mooting*—this debate. Of particular importance is Preus's resurrection of the biblical interpretation of Spinoza's erstwhile colleague Ludwig Meyer, whom he regards as the hidden opponent of the *Treatise*. Meyer was an idiosyncratic rationalist, who aspired to produce a systematic reinterpretation of the Bible which would bring it into harmony with the new Cartesian and even more recent Spinozist philosophy. Spinoza, who already had thorough experience with such an approach in his early reading of Maimonides and other medieval rationalists, would have none of it. In opposition, he developed a thoroughly historicist approach which alienated the language, text, and doctrine of the biblical documents from the present day and placed it in a historically interesting but politically irrelevant distant past. (This approach also has Maimonidean roots, but that is another story.)

In doing so, Spinoza invented modern biblical criticism. As Preus writes, "His approach to scripture comprehended all the discoveries and advances that made a new departure necessary." It is nice irony that Preus gives new precision to our understanding of the origins and primary aims of Spinoza's method of biblical interpretation by employing a direct methodological descendant of precisely the historicism which is at its heart.

Nancy Levene is Preus's successor at Indiana University, and though she is thoroughly anti-Straussian, her approach to the material is constructive rather than contextual. Much as Smith, she presents a Spinoza who still speaks to us about the predicaments of religion and democracy. In *Spinoza's Revelation: Religion, Democracy and Reason*, Levene takes Spinoza's positive

claims to be presenting a genuine, if heterodox, religious approach to the Bible and the place of religion in a democracy less ironically than either Smith's Straussian or Preus's historicist reading will allow. In an important passage, Levene writes,

Spinoza is not implying that Scripture is the only or even the primary instance of God's word in the world. He is suggesting something different from both Jewish and Christian readers, and different too from the philosophical and historical-critical readings of the Bible that would continue to develop after him. Spinoza's reading of the Bible is intended to establish that the truth of the Bible is a universal and eternal truth precisely because it is revealed, that is available in the text of a particular instance; we only know its content—its "wages," as he puts it—from its appearance in particular histories directed to particular audiences in particular conditions. Despite Spinoza's occasional implication that obedience is simply the way to salvation for the ignorant multitude, it is not that truth abides eternally and is periodically also revealed in certain texts at certain times. Rather, it is that truths of reason have themselves not always been in the world. (92-93)

One way to take this is that Spinoza thinks we can attain important truths through reflection upon the Bible, just as we can through any natural, human product of a particular history. But this is not all that Levene means, since that would make the Bible and its authority in European society irrelevant, or, at least, no more relevant than anything else. Rather, she seems to be arguing that Spinoza developed something like a distinctively modern (or even postmodern) version of the doctrine of double truth, which Renan ascribed to Averroës. In the next paragraph, Levene writes,

The integrity of each—divine and human, minds and texts, reasoning and obeying—depends on their separation. It depends on understanding that philosophy and theology no more express the same truth from different angles than they express different truths from the same angle—that philosophy and theology are each sovereign (absolutely independent of each other) only if they are conceived in relation to each other. (93)

Levene's exegetical argument for this reading is complex and I cannot do justice to it in the compass of this review, but I am also not convinced. Here, I am inclined to side with Smith, who is willing cheerfully to accept the charges of duplicitous atheism that were hurled at Spinoza. When, at the end of the preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza denies that "Reason is a mere handmaid to Theology," he is at the beginning of a long and deliberate siege war against the latter. Perhaps Levene, who can be an extraordinarily subtle reader, can accommodate this within her account of Spinoza's project, but at the moment I do not see how. This leads us to the biographical question, addressed by Steven Nadler, of the precise nature of Spinoza's heresy.

III

Steven Nadler's book, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, is different in form, content, and approach from any of the books I have discussed so far. It starts with a rhetorical bang: "It is a splendid mystery," he writes, full stop, paragraph break. The mystery is what Spinoza did in 1656, when he was only twenty-three years old, unpublished, and an orphan, to provoke the leadership of the Portuguese Synagogue into the most vituperative *Cherem*, or writ of excommunication, that it ever promulgated. Among the famous highlights are these:

But having failed to make him mend his wicked ways, and, on the contrary, daily receiving more and more serious information about the abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds ... the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel. By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza ... cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. . . . And the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. . . . (Nadler, 2)

What were Spinoza's abominable heresies and monstrous deeds? It is striking that the *parnasim* of the Sephardic Jewish community seem to have got it so right, as it were, so early. Although this community, fragile and defensive in its recent emergence from the Converso world of Spain and Portugal, pronounced a perhaps unprecedented number of excommunications, they managed to recognize Spinoza as their most dangerous heretic before he had published a word. On the other hand, Nadler may be overstating both the mystery and the drama of the occasion. This is his description, drawing on the work of Offenber and Salomon, of the origins of the text of the *Cherem*:

[It] had had been brought back to Amsterdam from Venice by Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera almost forty years earlier. . . . Mortera received the appropriate text from Venice's chief rabbi, his former teacher, Leon Modena. Modena, in turn had adapted it from the late thirteenth-century compendium of Jewish law and customs, the *Kol Bo* ('All is Within'). Mortera's Venetian mentor, a man possessed of both immense learning and a seriously flawed character, was not to be trifled with. He cobbled together a document full of curses and imprecations . . . their sheer quantity makes the *cherem* actually used for Spinoza decades later mild by comparison. It was a text that the Amsterdam Jews seem to have kept in reserve. . . . As far as we know, Modena's elaborate composition was brought out in the seventeenth century only for the banning of Spinoza. Therein lies the puzzle. (3)

This is snappy, suspenseful writing. Nadler has a sense of plot and pacing rare among scholars, let alone historians of philosophy. Still, it should be noted that the title *Kol Bo* is just the Hebrew equivalent of the Latin *Vade Mecum*. It is a one-volume handbook, and it took no great scholarship on the part of Modena to crib some language from it, which then was kept around as possible boilerplate. Moreover, the fact that it was apparently only drawn on in part lessens the sense of a rhetorical WMD, carefully held by the officials of the community for a situation of extreme doxological danger. Especially since it was originally drafted for a disputatious but garden-variety communal dispute: a synagogue breakaway ("that," as the old joke goes, "is the *schule* I don't pray at"). So I am a little skeptical over whether it is, in the end, "a splendid mystery," or just a historical curiosity that Spinoza's excommunication contains rather more heat than one might have expected. But even if Nadler may have indulged in a literary conceit, it is one with heuristic value, for it allows him to explore the limits and possibilities of seventeenth-century Jewish thought to great effect.

This is so, despite the fact that I think Nadler's answer to the mystery he poses is fundamentally flawed. Briefly, it is that the community was particularly exercised over Spinoza's rejection of

the idea of immortality, or at least a robust, individual immortality such as is contemplated in rabbinic and medieval texts. Nadler finds this paradoxical, since he thinks that there is no Jewish dogma regarding the immortality of the soul:

However there was still the question—and it was a particularly glaring one, in the light of the Jewish tradition and the wide maneuvering room usually provided therein for thinking on metaphysical matters—as to why a denial of immortality of the soul should contribute to one’s earning an excommunication. (177)

His conclusion is that, because of the vulnerability of the very idea of rabbinic tradition among returned marranos living in a Calvinist country (which defined itself against the “Pharasaism” of the Roman Catholic Church), the rabbis and communal leaders found themselves much less willing than their predecessors to allow for wide metaphysical maneuvers. “Jewish Amsterdam in the 1650s,” he writes, “was simply the wrong place in which to deny the immortality of the soul.” But this overstates the case. The famous and classic rabbinic text with regard to heresy is *m. Sanhedrin* 10:1:

All Israel have a portion in the world to come, as it is written “Your people shall all be righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands that I may be glorified,” (Isa 60 : 21). But the following have no portion in the world to come: he who says that there is no resurrection of the dead, and he who says that the Torah is not from heaven, and an *apikoros*. (reviewer’s translation)

Note that this text which is aimed at decisively ruling out certain heretical beliefs mentions the divinity of the Torah (which the young Spinoza also apparently had already denied) and the specific doctrine of the resurrection of the dead (we shall leave aside the interesting question as to what the Mishna understood an Epicurean to be) does not include the belief in an afterlife, but only because it absolutely presupposes it, *as does the entire rabbinic tradition that follows*. This does not sit well with Nadler’s characterization:

Is there a Jewish doctrine of the immortality of the soul? Perhaps it is better to say that, among Jewish rabbinic traditions, there is a dominant tendency toward belief in personal immortality, with a fair amount of disagreement on the detailed nature of what happens to the soul after death. (62)

The interested reader should not turn to Nadler for an understanding of rabbinic theology, and this harms his account of what is distinctive about the religion of seventeenth-century Amsterdam Jewry. Fortunately, his real interest is in Spinoza’s view of immortality and here his exegesis is not only lucid but also convincing.

There is one contributory reason for the striking language of Spinoza’s *herem*, which Nadler does not mention and it has little to do with metaphysics and rabbinic doctrine. Spinoza’s first name was, of course, Baruch, which means blessed. When in his mature philosophical works, he speaks of the possibility of attaining blessedness, there is most likely a pun lurking there, as there surely was in the repeated maledictions against Spinoza in the century after his death, in which his name seemed almost to have been changed from the blessed to the accursed Spinoza. The very first instance of such puns may be in the bitter maledictions of the *Cherem*: “cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be when he comes in,” and so on.

 IV

Whatever afterlife Spinoza does or does not enjoy personally or impersonally, there is the question of his literary afterlife. For Spinoza has had perhaps the most extraordinary reception history of any of the great modern philosophers, not only among professional philosophers but also more widely. As noted above, for a century he remained the accursed Spinoza until a sudden reversal under the auspices of the early romantics, such as Novalis and Goethe, in which his wholly original blessedness was perceived. Perhaps more parochially, he has been the patron saint of Jewish nonconformism for more than two centuries.

At the end of the penultimate chapter of *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud looks forward to the day when the modern citizen will join “with our fellow unbelievers, [and] be able to say without regret

We leave heaven
To the angels and the sparrows.”

The unbeliever in question was Heine, who in turn was speaking of Spinoza. Although Willi Goetschel does not quote this particular text, it is precisely this tradition whose origins he reinterprets in his dense, rewarding study, *Spinoza’s Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing and Heine*. Goetschel begins with a substantial and interesting interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy and its distinctive modernity. Here his interpretation has points of contact with that of Levene in his insistence that far from being “anti-religious or anti-spiritual ... Spinoza’s is the only modern philosophy that makes religion possible for modern consciousness.” Goetschel devotes the next two sections to equally long and ambitious discussions of Moses Mendelssohn and his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. There is also a much shorter discussion of Heine (which perhaps does not fully justify the subtitle, but is interesting nonetheless).

In *Jerusalem* (1783), Mendelssohn mentions Spinoza only once, and then only, it seems, in passing. “In matters of moral philosophy,” he writes, “Hobbes has the same merit as Spinoza has in metaphysics. His ingenious errors have occasioned inquiry.” But, as Guttman showed a generation ago, Spinoza’s work, and in particular the political work to which Mendelssohn does not refer, is the single most important text with which Mendelssohn is in dialogue. What Goetschel shows is that in fact Mendelssohn and Lessing’s lifelong intellectual exchange, which became one of the great symbols of Enlightenment tolerance, had the writings and figure of Spinoza as its constant subtext. This was true not merely in Lessing’s plays *Die Juden* and *Natan der Weise* or in their shared aspirations for Jewish rights but also in their important discussions of aesthetics. This helps us understand why Jacobi’s famous instigation of the “Panteism controversy,” in which he alleged to Mendelssohn that Lessing had confessed his conversion to Spinozism before he died (and thus showed the dead-end to which Enlightenment led), hit Mendelssohn so hard. His response was the last great work of German pre-Kantian philosophy, *Morning Hours*. In it he undertook the defense of a “purified Spinozism,” to which it would be no shame for his great friend to have adhered. It will be not the least of Goetschel’s book’s merits if it brings new interest in Mendelssohn’s last great work. Mendelssohn’s friends and family believed that the effort of writing it killed him.

A final note on pedagogy and audience. His ability to inspire almost religious devotion and hellish vituperation notwithstanding, Spinoza is an extraordinarily difficult thinker who often leaves contemporary students cold. Of the books under review, I can only recommend *Spinoza's Book of Life* and *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* unreservedly for an undergraduate audience. At the graduate level, the other three books might complement each other well in a course focused on the political and religious import of Spinoza's metaphysics. Each of the three books makes genuine and important contributions to the

study of Spinoza's thought, its historical context and later influence, but they are aimed more or less exclusively at specialists and their graduate students, and can, at most, be used sparingly with even advanced undergraduates.

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