

SPINOZA: FOUNDER OF MODERN NATURALISM

Richard J. Bernstein

Es Muss Sein

Abstract

Recognizing Spinoza as the “father of modern naturalism”, Bernstein demonstrates the profound affinities of Spinoza’s distinctive conception of Nature with the contemporary appeals to naturalism. Starting with Spinoza’s metaphysical claims, Bernstein shows that in the *Ethics*, God is strictly identical with Substance, and Substance — with Nature. Following Yovel, Bernstein stresses Spinoza’s use of “double language”, whereby the traditional concept of God gives way to an impersonal God identical with the necessary laws of nature. God or Nature turns out to be an all-encompassing system that determines all of nature — including human and nonhuman. In Bernstein’s view, Spinoza’s rejection of the ontological dualism within nature brings him close to those contemporary philosophers committed to a naturalistic account of human conceptual capacities and intentionality. From discussing Spinoza’s metaphysics and theory of knowledge —that is, Nature considered as a system of thought— Bernstein turns to Spinoza’s ethics, which offers a naturalistic alternative to the religious doctrine of salvation, suggesting moderation of passions through rational knowledge of the causes of human affects. Bernstein concludes by considering the reception of Spinoza’s ideas after his death and their relevance for philosophical naturalism today.

Keywords: Spinoza, naturalism, philosophy of immanence, unified system of nature, naturalistic ethics.

I

There has never been a philosopher like Spinoza — a philosopher so viciously condemned and so ecstatically praised. Spinoza, born in Amsterdam on November 14, 1632,

was descended from a Jewish Marrano family that fled from Portugal at the end of the sixteenth century. Amsterdam at the time was a wealthy tolerant city where the Jews were allowed to practice their religion. The

young Spinoza received a rigorous Jewish education in the relatively closed Jewish community, but on July 27, 1656, when Spinoza was not yet 24, he was banned—in the harshest manner—from the Jewish community for his “evil opinions” and his “horrible heresies”. The Ruling Council of the Amsterdam Jewish community banished him from “the nation of Israel” and proclaimed the following *herem* (ban) on him:

“By the degree of the Angels and the word of the Saints we ban, cut off, curse and anathemize Baruch de Espinoza... with all the curses written in the Torah [*Ley*]: Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night, cursed in his lying down and cursed in his waking up, cursed in his going forth and cursed in his coming in; and may the L[ord] not want his pardon, and may the L[ord]’s wrath and zeal burn upon him... and ye that did cleave into the L[ord] your G[od] are all alive today”.

We warn that none may contact him orally or in writing, nor do him any favor, nor stay under the same roof with him, nor read any paper he made or wrote.¹

During his lifetime, especially after he published his *Theological-Political Treatise*, in 1670, Spinoza was also severely attacked by the Christians—both the Protestants (especially the Dutch Calvinists) and the Catholics—for his heretical views. The *Theological-Political Treatise* was condemned as a book “full of abominations”, a

¹For the full text of the ban, see Y. Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics. Volume I: The Marrano of Reason*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 3.

book “forged in hell”, written by the devil himself.²

Spinoza was accused of being an atheist, although he consistently denied this. There is a good reason why some condemned—and others praised—Spinoza for his alleged atheism. If we think of theism as the doctrine asserting the existence of a God that transcends this world, a God who created the world, a God who performs miracles, and a God who possesses such anthropomorphic traits as “wrath” and “jealousy”, then there is no ambiguity that Spinoza rejected any such conception of God. He argued that such a conception of God is self-contradictory and incoherent. Spinoza was an originator of a higher biblical criticism that interpreted the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) not as the word of God or the source of “sacred truths” but as a human document dealing with moral and political issues. He sought to demystify the Bible.³

²See S. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, and S. James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, for a discussion of the reactions to Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*.

³For a detailed analysis of the *Theological-Political Treatise* that focuses on the Spinoza’s polemics, see S. James, *op. cit.* For a historical analysis of the significance and influence of the TPT, see J.I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001. For explorations of the contemporary significance of the TPT, see G. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*; trans. M. Joughin, New York, Zone Books, 1990; L. Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*; trans. G. Lock, London, NLB, 1976; A. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. M. Hardt, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991; and E. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. P. Snowdon, New York, Verso, 1998.