

Spinoza and Late 18th/Early 19th Century Germany

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We're here in a building named for a man of passion. A man who lived life to the full. Who wrote books inspired by love affairs. Who at least for a time was associated with the Sturm and Drang movement — meaning “Storm and Stress.”

And yet we're here to celebrate primarily a very different man. A hero to Goethe. A hero to many who admire Goethe. A hero. But not a twin.

We're here to celebrate *not* a fellow countryman of Goethe, but a Dutch Jew. A man known by many for his stoicism. For his belief that human excellence entails freedom from control by the passions. Indeed, for his belief that freedom as we know it is a chimera, and that everything proceeds from necessity — down to the simplest coin flip.

Goethe once wrote the brilliant Sorrows of Young Werther to purge himself of despair after a failed love affair. Yet his hero Spinoza was a man known for his asceticism, if not in theory then in practice. Spinoza was nobody's hedonist. He survived primarily off a diet of gruel. He lived in humble abodes, and in some years he feared for his personal safety when he left his home. No Goethe, let alone a Don Juan, Spinoza is a man whose sex life, or lack thereof, confounds his biographers.

Could Spinoza, like his disciple Goethe, write novels about love? Highly doubtful. “As far as sensual pleasure is concerned,” he argued, “the mind gets so caught up in it... that it is quite prevented from thinking of anything else. But after the enjoyment of sensual pleasure is past, the greatest sadness follows. ... And there are innumerable examples of people who have hastened their death through too much sensual pleasure.”

I guess you can tell why Spinoza is known as a rationalist, and not a romantic.

The differences between Spinoza and Goethe continue. And many would regard Goethe the more fortunate of the two for those differences. Goethe was celebrated as a national hero. Spinoza, by contrast, was abandoned by his own people. First, the Jewish community excommunicated him, prohibiting Jews from standing within six feet of his body. When he started publishing books, his works were reviled by Dutch officialdom. The delegates to the Synod of South Holland stated that his Theological-Political Treatise was “as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen.” Fearing reprisals, he died without publishing any of his famous philosophical masterpieces under his own name. And when his Ethics was published posthumously, he was roundly denounced for his sinful doctrines.

For many years, Spinoza’s name lived in infamy. A godless man, he was called. A wicked atheist. A man who had the evil audacity to deny human freedom — that greatest of divine gifts to those who were made in God’s image.

Oh sure, Spinoza had his friends, his disciples. He always had a coterie of friends, which is not surprising considering that he was by all accounts a social man with a pleasant disposition. But Spinoza’s support was never widespread, and never very public. Leibnitz, the one great philosopher who met Spinoza, borrowed unmercifully from Spinoza, but nonetheless felt the need to repeatedly publicly denounce him. For that is what you did in the 17th century if you knew what was good for you. You denounced his heresy. And you labelled him a force of darkness.

As the 18th century rolled around, Spinoza’s reputation hardly improved. John Toland, the English writer, coined the term “pantheism” in 1705 to refer, sympathetically, to Spinoza’s

philosophy. But most saw Spinoza's pantheism as simply a form of hypocrisy: refer to God as being everywhere, so that in fact he will be seen as existing *nowhere*.

With some exceptions, that last word pretty much sums up Spinoza's reputation until the latter part of the 18th century. Some dramatic event was needed to resuscitate that reputation. That event would occur in Germany. The year was 1785. The event is known as the Pantheism Conflict or Controversy (Pantheismusstreit).

At the time the Pantheism Conflict took place, Spinoza was well known in intellectual circles. For example, his Theological-Political Treatise, which secularized the Bible and spawned the field of Biblical criticism, had already generated considerable controversy in the arena of theology. But the controversy sparked by the Pantheism Conflict would spread well beyond an arena as limited as theology. It ultimately engulfed wider and wider circles in the German intelligentsia, to the point where anyone who was anyone in German intellectual life seemed to be involved.

When I think about the concept of evolution, and the Hegelian notion that human society continues to progress to more and more rational forms, I am reminded of the Pantheism Conflict of 1785. Here we are, more than 200 years later, and our intellectuals have become obsessed, indeed embattled, about such figures as O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky and Gary Condit. In 1785, surely a primitive time according to our sensibilities, German intellectual life was consumed instead with questions about immanence versus transcendence, free will versus determinism, reason versus sentimentalism. Obviously, we've evolved profoundly.

Some have called the Pantheism Conflict the end of the Enlightenment. And indeed it was sparked by a work published by an opponent of rationalism, Friedrich Jacobi. Jacobi was

an advocate of faith as the path to religious truth, which he thought involved the belief in a supernatural deity. In matters of religion, he said critically that the inevitable end of the rationalist endeavor is Spinozism, which in essence is nothing more than atheism. And a particularly pernicious form at that.

In 1785, Jacobi published a work that revealed his conversations with the recently-deceased playwright, Gotthold Lessing. According to Jacobi, Lessing had confessed to being a Spinozist, in the sense of not only opposing traditional theology but also believing that the world is a unified whole, and the earthly beings that we experience are mere modes, mere expressions of this unified substance. Lessing supposedly further confessed that he, following Spinoza, had become a determinist, and no longer had any use for free will. Jacobi's publication also included his own correspondence with one of Lessing's friends, Moses Mendelssohn, who like Spinoza was a Jewish rationalist. In this correspondence, Jacobi spoke to Mendelssohn about Lessing's alleged confession of Spinozism and challenged Mendelssohn to respond. Boy did he ever -- at least once the letters were published.

To understand how such a seemingly innocuous course of events could spark a heated national controversy, it is critical to understand the mind of Jacobi. In my view, Jacobi's attitude could be analogized to the self-hating homosexual who turns to vicious homophobia to protect against a despised fate. In his dealings with Lessing, Jacobi became convinced that reason led to Spinozism. And he couldn't bear it. He desperately took that "leap of faith" toward Christianity and sentimentalism, a leap that Lessing said his own "old legs and heavy head" were no longer able to take. And when he took that leap and published his thoughts, Jacobi let loose such a portrait of Spinozism that one would think that Dutch Jew was the Devil himself.

When Jacobi published his work, Mendelssohn stepped into the breach. He felt the need to come to the defense of his friend, Lessing, who had thought so much of Mendelssohn that he used him as the model for the title character of his drama, "Nathan the Wise." Mendelssohn viewed Jacobi's publication as pure libel against a recently deceased man, associating his friend with a demonized philosophy. After Mendelssohn rebuked Jacobi in return, the Pantheism Conflict began to spiral. Everyone, it seemed, felt the need to respond in one manner or another. For example, Kant would weigh in by trying to "cleanse myself of the suspicion of Spinozism," whereas Goethe and Herder would write in Spinoza's defense.

Jacobi came not to praise Spinoza but to bury him. In fact, the result was just the opposite. In declaring that Spinoza's monistic determinism was the only position that a rationalist philosopher could consistently hold, Jacobi may have persuaded some to abandon rationalism. But to others, Jacobi's Spinoza became a hero. He was now the patron saint of reason. His philosophy offered political liberalism, the willingness to debunk anthropomorphisms and other religious myths, and the ability to satisfy the lust for a romantic union with nature. To his late 18th century German disciples, Spinoza's philosophy came to be valued as a beloved synthesis between rationalist, atheistic materialism, on the one hand, and the celebration of the divine, on the other. Those who pined for spirituality, for mystical union, while at the same time being devoted to the principle of following the truth wherever it leads, now were permitted a good night's sleep.

Spinoza himself spoke of nature or substance as God. And so, indeed, the rehabilitated Spinoza became seen, perhaps for the first time, as a proponent of God. Famously, the philosopher Novalis referred to Spinoza as a "God intoxicated man." This was a far cry from his

reputation during his own lifetime, or the century that followed.

For Goethe, 1785 was a particularly pivotal year. When he reread Spinoza at the beginning of that year, he found in Spinoza the foundations of what would become the philosophy of Goethe's age of maturity. In June, two months before Jacobi published his correspondence, Goethe told Jacobi

You acknowledge the highest reality, which is the basis of Spinozism, on which all else rests, from which all else flows. He does not prove the Being of God, Being *is* God. And if for this reason others scold Spinoza for being an atheist, I should like to name him and praise him as theissimum, indeed, christianissimum. [In other words, the most Christian.]

The following year, Goethe once again sang his praises for Spinoza in correspondence with Jacobi. Goethe continued to refer to Spinoza by his former name of atheist. Yet in doing so, Goethe implied that Spinozism doesn't require abandoning the true God of reason, but merely the imaginary object of theistic faith.

I cling more and more firmly to the reverence for God of the atheist [Spinoza] ... and I cede to you [Christians] all that your religion enjoins and must enjoin... When you say that one can only *believe* in God ... then I say to you that I lay great weight on *looking* and *seeing* and when Spinoza, speaking of intuitive science says this manner of knowing moves from the adequate idea of the formal essence of some attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things, these words give me courage to devote my entire life to the contemplation of the things that I can reach and of whose formal essence I can hope to fashion an adequate idea.

Goethe was hooked. For several years, he even carried a copy of the *Ethics* in his pocket on a daily basis. Spinoza's God -- or, if you prefer, absolutely infinite substance -- would be Goethe's guide to understanding not merely *Being* itself but all earthly forms or *beings* that we experience. And this is just what Spinoza the philosopher would want from a disciple. But there

is reason to believe that the Spinoza that Goethe and some other German Romanticists adopted wasn't Spinoza the Philosopher so much as Spinoza the Guru, or perhaps even Spinoza the Literary Muse.

Consider the following passage from Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*

After I looked around the whole world in vain for a means of developing my strange nature, I finally hit upon the *Ethics* of this man. Here I found the serenity to calm my passions; a wide and free view over the material and moral world seemed to open before me. Above all, I was fascinated by the boundless disinterestedness that emanated from him. That wonderful sentence 'he who truly loves God must not desire God to love him in return' with all the propositions on which it rests, with all the consequences that spring from it, filled my whole subsequent thought.

It was Bertrand Russell, only the second non-German other than Spinoza whom I have mentioned tonight, who referred to Spinoza as the "noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers." I submit that Spinoza owes his exalted status among German Romantics not to the rigors of his philosophical system. Rather, he is beloved for a combination of his reputation as a secular saint, his obvious devotion to truth and the faculty of reason, and the extent to which his philosophical conclusions harmonize with the ethics of mysticism and *joie de vivre*. This is very different from saying that Goethe and his colleagues digested Spinoza's grand rationalist edifice and swallowed it whole for its consistency. They were inspired intellectually and pacified spiritually. They did not need to be convinced rationally that the bricks and mortar were all in order.

That is why these German Romanticists, as a philosophical community, embraced Spinoza much more than the analytic philosophers who followed them more than a century down the road. For truth be told, the above sentence from Bertrand Russell was merely the first one about Spinoza in Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*. Russell followed that sentence by

saying that “Intellectually some others have surpassed [Spinoza], but ethically he is supreme.” If Russell is correct, I could see Goethe saying, that might not be much of an indictment against Spinoza. For what is more important than ethics — as that term is used in its broad, philosophical sense — to a man like Goethe who is not a mind in a vat, but a vibrant, spiritual lover of the universe? And if a philosopher approached his philosophical tasks -- indeed, his life as a whole -- as the ethicist supreme, how could one improve on that philosopher as a source of inspiration?

As we move from the decade of the Pantheism Conflict towards the end of the 18th century and beyond, Spinoza continued to be a major force in German intellectual life. One after another, great German philosophers adopted Spinoza’s principle of immanence — the notion that there exists in all of reality nothing other than the substance that our own very world is composed of, no personal creator who sculpts our world from the outside, nor any other type of supernatural forces or values. Immanence does not imply that the concept of transcendence can never be appropriately used; for it might be said the human frames of reference transcend that of the flatworm. But just as the Spinozist form of the immanence principle holds that a human is composed of physical and spiritual substance that is not wholly “other” than the substance that comprises the flatworm, so it says that there exists no superior being that is wholly “other” than the world which we experience. Inspired by this principle, Fichte became a pantheist. He rejected the charge of atheism, but was considered sufficiently heretical that he eventually was forced to leave Jena University in 1799. Schlegel was inspired by Spinoza to adopt the philosophy of immanence — and to seek the goal of “an immediate and intuitive

knowledge of nature in God.” Schelling also was bitten by the bug. And so was the most celebrated German philosopher of the early 19th century, the great Hegel.

A mature Hegel, writing in the 1820s, stated that “[w]hen one begins to philosophize one must be first a Spinozist. The soul must bathe itself in the aether of this single substance, in which everything one has had for true is submerged.” We, in short, are in God. So are our thoughts, our arms, are legs, and our nightmares.

But Hegel was not Goethe or Lessing. He was not a poet, a novelist, or a playwright. He is a philosopher’s philosopher — limited perhaps, in the breadth of his art, but privileged with the depth that flows from being a specialist. Hegel was not satisfied to view Spinoza as muse or guru. He turned a critical eye on the rationalist system of Spinoza. And he found it flawed – presumably, flawed in ways that Spinoza’s earlier disciples, like Goethe, would have to concede.

Hegel’s fundamental critique was that Spinoza’s God was an inert, lifeless substance, not a vital, dynamic subject that evolves over time. And Spinoza’s philosophy, thought Hegel, suffered from its lack of respect for the principle of the dialectic that is needed to explain all the seeming contradictions inside the Absolute. To Hegel, Spinoza's philosophy sorely lacked the notion of *negation* in the absolute infinite substance. Hegel wondered how Spinoza can satisfactorily explain the contingent, finite aspect of life -- the countless number and variety of earthly beings that we experience with our senses -- if all that necessarily exists is the Absolute. Cannot this variety of finite forms, this dog eat dog world, be explained only by the notion that conflict exists within the Absolute itself, conflict that relentlessly works itself out over time? Indeed, Hegel questioned whether Spinoza's substance, his God, is even alive. Or is it merely

some Platonic form, some ideal object that might be beautiful to behold with our intuitive minds, but that cannot breathe and cannot grow?

On first blush, Hegel's critique might be seen as devastating for any German romanticist. And yet the nation's love affair with Spinoza did not subside. The task simply became one of taking the saintly, intellectual spirit of Spinoza, dousing oneself in the principle of immanence, and finding a way to enliven the master's God in light of Hegel's call for reform. In short, the task was to synthesize Spinoza and Hegel. Or, if you prefer, to recognize the fundamental Hegelian notion that Spinozism was a point of departure, indeed *the* philosophical point of departure, but not a final destination. Spinoza and Hegel became perhaps the leading influences on the work of such mid-19th century German thinkers as Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. Marx, in fact, leaned heavily on Spinoza to avoid deifying spirit, as did Hegel, and to instead emphasize the unsurpassed status of physical nature.

As 19th century Germany wound to an end, a genius would emerge who would recognize himself as a link in a chain that began with Spinoza and continued through Goethe, whom he often mentioned with Spinoza as if the two were a matched set. His name, of course, is Friedrich Nietzsche. And while any of Nietzsche's readers would know him to be a huge fan of Goethe's, on one occasion in 1881, Nietzsche appeared to forget Goethe altogether and focus instead on their mutual benefactor.

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted. I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now* was inspired by 'instinct.' Not only is his over-all tendency like mine — making knowledge the *most powerful* affect — but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergencies are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the differences in time, culture and science. In summa, my solitude, which as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is at least a dualitude.

But as we now see, the Nietzsche/Spinoza relationship is not merely a dualitude. In fact, it is but a small fragment of a substantial community. A community of kindred spirits, often separated geographically, temporally and ethnically, but molded together by a particular beloved. Was their beloved the affirmative principle of immanence? Or perhaps the negative principle that the God who sculpts from the outside is like the Emperor without any clothes? I prefer to think that the key to what makes this community was instead supplied by none other than Friedrich Jacobi. For it was Jacobi that recognized the real demon here. It's the love for philosophy. The willingness not so much to follow Spinoza as to follow Socrates — and therefore the truth, whether it should lead in the individual's mind to some reformed but respectful conception of organized religion or toward out and out heresy.

Spinoza was excommunicated for this love. Fichte was fired. Nietzsche was moved to madness. But none of these individuals was alone. For each one knew that as long as human beings are able to breathe, they can reflect, and they can share with others the courage of their reflections. Spinoza regularly worked into the wee hours to do just that. And we, as members of his living community, are forever in his debt.