

**LECTURE INTRODUCING THE “SPINOZIUM”
DELIVERED AT WASHINGTON DC’S THEATRE J
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Introductory Note: The purpose of the “Spinozium” was to gather people together in Washington, D.C.’s Jewish theatre, and consider whether to revoke the excommunication (*cherem*) that was imposed against Spinoza by the Amsterdam Sephardic community on July 27, 1656. This lecture was delivered immediately prior to the Spinozium on the same afternoon. After several hours of deliberations, 149 ballots were cast, and the attendees voted 78% to 22% to lift the *cherem*.

Instead of going all the way back to Holland of the 1650s, I’d like to take us back to the 1780s and Germany. It was there that large numbers of intellectuals waged a heated debate about the philosophy of Spinoza. Known today as the Pantheism Controversy, this national debate was sparked by a protestant theologian named Jacoby. Jacoby was concerned that in an Enlightenment era, reason would reign supreme. And that the dictates of reason may not lead to his beloved Christian faith, but rather, to the so-called atheism of Spinoza. One day, Jacoby read a certain poem to Lessing, and he did so with an agenda: if Lessing liked this poem, Jacoby figured, he must be a lover of Spinoza. The poem, *Prometheus*, was written by a young man who was deeply enamored of Spinoza – a man named Goethe.

Prometheus was, quite simply, a kiss-off to God – or at least the God of conventional theology. Referring to the Lord as “the sleeper above,” Goethe asks the question: “I pay homage to you? For what? Have you ever relieved the burdened man’s anguish? Have you ever assuaged the frightened man’s tears?” And the poem concludes with a statement that would now be associated with atheistic humanism: “Here I sit, forming men in my image, a race to resemble me: to suffer, to weep, to enjoy, to be glad – and never to heed you. Like me!”

Followers of Spinoza disagree on my many things, but there are two views that seem to unite them, and both are reflected in Goethe’s *Prometheus*. First, that the traditional conception of God – the one based in supernaturalism – is not consistent with truth. And second, that in the modern world, people deserve the truth.

The truth is, though, that Spinoza devoted his philosophy – and his heart – to the one he named “God.” So if you are going to read atheism into Spinoza, you’re essentially claiming that this disciple of reason and honesty was really just telling one big lie. Goethe would disagree. And that is why he devoted his own religious philosophy not only to criticizing the conception of God that Spinoza fought, but also to lauding the conception of God that Spinoza extolled. I hope today to give you a sense of that conception and to make you appreciate that simply to equate Spinoza’s God with nature, and thus render superfluous Spinoza’s use of the word “God,” is a bit glib to say the least.

Before we get into Spinoza's philosophy, let's start with some basic facts about his life. He was born in 1632 in Amsterdam, the son of a well-to-do Sephardic merchant. Spinoza was given a traditional Jewish education, and indeed, had his father lived to a ripe old age, Spinoza may never have been known in world history as a rebel. But his father died when Spinoza was in his early 20s, and that freed him psychologically to go public with his heresies. Now keep in mind that he had been part of a community of Jews that originated in Spain, left in search of religious freedom to Portugal, and then, for the same reason, emigrated to Holland. They had to be extremely insecure, and the last thing they needed in their midst was a heretic who would inspire the authorities to boot them from Holland. Where else could they go? So it shouldn't surprise you that when in 1656, a 23-year-old Spinoza challenged basic Jewish *and* Christian teachings, the community could not keep him in the fold. The result was the *cherem*.

On that day, figuratively speaking, Baruch Spinoza died, and Benedict de Spinoza was born. For the remaining 21 years of his life, Spinoza never joined any organized community. He maintained close ties to a small, informal group of free-thinkers from liberal Protestant backgrounds. But aside from that group, he belonged to no community and was widely hated by the authorities.

By day, Spinoza eked out a modest living as a lens grinder. By night, he was a philosopher. In that capacity, his reputation rose to the point where, at age 40, he was offered a job as a professor at the University of Heidelberg. But he turned it down, fearing that the University's leaders would limit his ability to teach heresy ... or, in other words, truth. Four years later, the poor lens grinder died of tuberculosis. Whether or not that illness can be attributed to the dust particles he had inhaled at work, that explanation has certainly become part of the Spinoza legend.

In his own century, Spinoza was known primarily as a Godless atheist. But by the early 19th century, his reputation had turned a corner. Novales famously referred to him as a "God-intoxicated man." Goethe said that far from being irreligious, Spinoza was "the most religious, the most Christian." As for Hegel, he once said that "When one begins to philosophize, one must be first a Spinozist."

Moving closer to our own time, Nietzsche saw Spinoza as his great predecessor. And Freud, who claimed to have an "extraordinarily high respect" for Spinoza, praised the liberal, intellectual "atmosphere" he created. As for Einstein, he saw Spinoza as a true hero. Famously, Einstein once said: "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."

In the middle of the 20th century, Bertrand Russell wrote the following in his *History of Western Philosophy*. "Spinoza is the noblest and most loveable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme." That is high praise for any Son of Jacob, whether or not he finds himself excommunicated.

Spinoza wrote several pieces of literature, but two stand far above the rest, and only one of these, the *Tractatus Theological-Politicus* or *TTP*, was published while he was alive. The *TTP* was far ahead of its time. Yet you would surely recognize many of its ideas, for they have become the bedrock of modern liberal thought.

“The true aim of government is liberty,” Spinoza wrote. “The ultimate aim of government is ... to free every man from fear, that he may live in all possible security; in other words, to strengthen his natural right to exist and work without injury to himself or others.” How is this accomplished? By preserving certain basic freedoms, such as the freedoms of speech, thought and religion.

Spinoza went on to explain how we can preserve those liberties.

- By freeing the state from any control by the church.
- Freeing our minds from the superstitions of Biblical literalism.
- Freeing our behavior from the yoke of those Biblical “commandments” we associate with rituals and not ethics.
- And recognizing that philosophy and religion are completely separate domains – one dealing with the universal teachings of reason, the other with inculcating values, like obedience and piety. Here’s the radical rub: this means we’re free to *stop* looking for a reasonable inner meaning or truth inside every Scriptural passage.

Spinoza, you see, was an original intent guy: he wanted to learn about the Bible’s meaning by studying it historically, linguistically and scientifically, as if we were examining an archeological treasure. It’s OK if we find that it doesn’t comport with reason, he taught, because the Bible is not a philosophy book. It’s a book for inculcating the basic ethical principles we need to respect if we wish to live in a free society.

I agree with Novales that Spinoza was *God* intoxicated. But for all his erudition as a student of Judaism, he was *not* Scripture intoxicated. His central path to God was through philosophy.

As for Spinoza’s view of the Jewish people, he clearly saw them as undistinguished in their theological wisdom. But he did sing their praises when it comes to their social organization. Spinoza wrote about the enlightened decisions of the ancient Hebrews to ensure security in property, alleviate poverty, and practice the separation of powers. He saw in ancient Hebrew civilization a political model for generations to come. Spinoza was an early advocate of democracy who taught that when power vests in a small group, it is wielded according to their passions, but when all citizens share power, they will more likely act according to reason. In short, you can draw a direct path from Spinoza’s political philosophy to that of Jefferson. For that, we can largely credit John Locke, who loved Spinoza and was loved by Jefferson.

We have spoken about Spinoza’s *TTP*. Yet, when you look at all the great minds he has influenced, most were primarily touched by his other great masterpiece, the *Ethics*.

The *Ethics* is extremely broad in its scope. It includes a theory of knowledge, an approach to human psychology, and a proscription for living the good life. But it begins with a conception of God.

Spinoza offers us a God without the myths of organized religion – in other words, without the anthropomorphisms. Spinoza is often referred to as a pantheist: one who equates God with the world. And indeed, he would argue that if nature exists as a unified whole, then there must be a God, at least in one way that he used the term.

Repeatedly, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza invoked the famous phrase “God or nature,” suggesting to some that his God *is* nature – nothing more, nothing less. That’s obviously how Richard Dawkins understands Spinoza. Dawkins began his bestselling screed *The God Delusion* by saying that while he’s about to ridicule the existence of God for 300 pages, he’s not challenging the God of Einstein and Spinoza. Why? Because, Dawkins says, it is merely “sexed up atheism.”

Actually, that view of Spinoza is overly simplistic. If you read the *Ethics* carefully, you’ll see that Spinoza does not merely equate God with nature, if by nature we mean the sum total of all the animals, vegetables, minerals and particles in the world. He views God in a more transcendent sense. For Spinoza, the point of departure in all of philosophy is “the knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature.” Let me underscore that – he believed there is complete unity between the mind and the physical things in the world; despite all appearances, they are one and the same thing. With respect to God, he starts with the key principle of radical unity – that there exists complete unity of substance, transcending all the multiplicity we see, touch or hear. It is with respect to the *source* of this unity -- the *Substance* – to use his word, where we find the transcendent element of his God.

Spinoza analogized the status of human beings living in this world with that of a worm in our bloodstream. From the perspective of a worm, every little object in that bloodstream is completely separate from each other. However, we understand nature well enough to know that the worm is merely part of a larger system – a human body. Spinoza takes this understanding one step further. He would argue that the more we understand the world, the more we see ourselves as finite expressions of a single, natural unity. And underlying this unity is the divine Substance: indivisible, simple, unbounded and infinite. This God is not what we usually mean by the whole of nature, which is a mere collection of bounded things. Spinoza’s God encompasses the simple creative unity that underlies, grounds and powers the amalgam we know as “nature.”

Whereas children of Abraham traditionally see God as the pinnacle of goodness, Spinozists see God as the pinnacle of *Being*. For Spinoza, nothing exists outside God – there’s no separate “creation.” God expresses from within and reveals an infinite number of limited forms, including homo sapiens. In the philosophy of Spinoza, we are merely natural creatures who fortunately are endowed with the capacity of reason.

Spinozists conceive of God through dualisms, just not the traditional ones like mind versus body, or good versus evil. God comes to be viewed based on the *combination* of two ways of looking at the world. One perspective is grounded in the dimension of time, and focuses on the world as a great multiplicity. From this perspective, the world (or “nature”) is conceived like a great interrelated organism that is constantly evolving over time and encompasses everything in nature. And each of us is seen as owing our existence to what has come before us and what is shaping us in the present day. Call that the perspective of the temporal. Then comes the perspective of the eternal. From that standpoint, Spinoza teaches, there is no “before, after or when.” There is just simple, unified, infinite existence. In other words, we no longer focus on *beings* (plural), but rather on *Being* (singular).

Spinoza’s God is as much this simple, indivisible *Being* as the great amalgam we call nature. God is the synthesis of the two perspectives. According to both, we human beings are no longer completely separate and independent entities. We all are integral parts of God -- our thoughts are God’s, and our bodies, God’s.

As you can see, there is clearly in this philosophy a place for the transcendent – for a realm of unity that underlies our world of birth and death. This is why many Spinozists refer to his philosophy not as pantheism, which simply says that the world is God, but rather as *panentheism*, which says that the world – that is, the world as we know it -- *is in* God. Spinoza’s God might not be supernatural but remains far greater than a finite mind can envision. How great? I quote Spinoza: “To those who ask why God did not so create all men, that they should be governed only by reason, I give no answer but this: because matter was not lacking to him for the creation of every degree of perfection from highest to lowest; ... [for] the laws of his nature are so vast, as to suffice for the production of everything conceivable by an infinite intelligence.”

Don’t expect this God to conform to a human-like ideal. Spinoza wanted his conception to be grounded in reason, not hopes and dreams. He taught that with science and philosophy, we can come to understand much about the eternal God. But there is infinitely more we cannot understand. Spinoza underscored this point by teaching that God has an infinite number of attributes of which we can know only two – extension and thought. In other words, we are wise to view God through the thoughts and things that manifest themselves in our world, and we’d all be surprised how well they can be understood with the help of reason. But let’s not be so conceited as to believe that the world of our comprehension includes all the dimensions of reality subsumed within the divine. We may be far more powerful than a worm in the bloodstream, but we are still just limited expressions of an unlimited God. So there is a profound *quantitative* difference between each of us and the worm, but a *qualitative* difference between us and the divine.

Spinoza’s conception of God provides some, but not all, of the *Ethics*’ many heresies. For example, that work has been reviled for such doctrines as that: (a) God is body and not just mind, (b) God is determined by nature to act as God does and does not act according to a design or purpose, and (c) we human beings lack both free will and a soul

that survives our body's death. Clearly, this man was a heretic. Yet when you discuss his philosophy simply by setting out his heresies, you do him a disservice. You see, Spinoza was a natural synthesizer. When he examined the great philosophical questions, he usually came up with one perspective that was heretical and another that was more acceptable to traditionalists. It's not that he was a diplomat seeking compromise. He was an independent thinker who was free to mine for the truth wherever he could find it. And what he found when it comes to the truth was that none of the old schools of thought had a monopoly on it.

So, for example, he spoke of a way in which people can see themselves as eternal, just as he spoke about other respects in which we are not. In addition, though he is commonly viewed as someone who decried the possibility of free will, he devoted his entire ethical and his political philosophy to maximizing our freedom. Similarly, while he taught that the passions are our undoing and the voice of reason must reign supreme, he also followed the very Jewish doctrine that people cannot help avoid being emotional. He taught that rather than attempting to subdue our emotions, we need to understand the basis for our emotions and replace them with stronger ones that are wholesome – that are conducive to our long-term health, happiness and enlightenment.

Spinoza synthesized others' teachings largely by devoting himself to the love of logical and scientific principles. But his even greater love was the intuition we can develop when we think beyond those general principles and see the essence of the individual things we encounter in day-to-day life. In particular, he strove to associate each of those things with their ultimate ground of being, God.

Spinoza's views regarding free will and determinism illustrate how he brought multiple perspectives to bear whenever he tackled the ultimate issues. As we have seen, Spinoza views the beings and events in our world as expressions of a God that transcends time and space. For such a God, everything is happening in the present, and the world as we know it is just the way it must be, for it is a reflection of God's own nature. Think of the old phrase "it is what it is;" that is one way that Spinoza sees everything in the world. So from this perspective of eternity, since events must unfold precisely as they do, there is no point getting upset about them. But was he a garden-variety fatalist, meaning one who passively accepts the status quo? No, because as an observer of the human condition, he also considered the standpoint of the temporal. And from that standpoint, who are we to know what we are fated to do and become? All we can know is what it means to be virtuous, and to have faith that virtue is its own reward. To Spinoza, the height of virtue is what he calls the "intellectual love of God." It is, Spinoza says, our surest path to contentment and blessedness.

To Spinoza, the "love of God" refers to *our* love for God, not God's love for us. In fact, my very favorite line of Spinoza's is that "he who truly loves God must not endeavor for God to love him in return." I've contemplated that line on many occasions. It has inspired me to believe that the greatest ethical imperative isn't so much to understand, or "intellectually love," God, but to live your life in a way that *honors* God and God's

expressions in this world, especially other human beings and animals. That is, after all, how we truly repay the gifts of any beloved – with honor.

To provide a bookend for this talk, I will conclude with another poem from Goethe, one that was written decades after *Prometheus*. This poem expresses Goethe's Spinozism beautifully, though this time, Goethe is not channeling Spinoza the rebel, but Spinoza the lover of the divine unity that is revealed in nature. The poem is called *A Thousand Forms*.

Take on a thousand forms, hide as you will, O Most-Beloved, at once I know 'tis
you
Conceal yourself in magic veils, and still, Presence-in-All, at once I know 'tis you

The cypress thrusting artless up and young, Beauty-in-Every-Limb, I know 'tis
you
The channeled crystal wave life flows along, All-Gentling-Tender One, I know
'tis you

You in the fountain plume's unfolding tip, All-Playful-One, what joy to know 'tis
you
Where cloud assumes a shape and changes it, one-Manifold-in-All, I know 'tis
you

I know, when flowers veil the meadow ground, O Starry-Twinkle-Hued, in beauty
you
When thousand-armed the ivy gropes around, Environer-of-All, I know 'tis you

When on a mountain sparks of dawn appear, at once, Great Gladdener, I welcome
you
Then with the sky above rotund and clear, then, Opener-of-the-Heart, do I breathe
you

What with bodily sense and soul I know, Teacher-of-All, I know alone through
you
All hundred names of Allah I bestow, with each will echo then a name for you