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ISRAEL, JONATHAN I. 2023. SPINOZA, LIFE AND LEGACY. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD.

Review by:
MICHIEL LEEZENBERG*
University of Amsterdam

Abstract

This book analyzes the life and legacy of the world-renowned Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, taking into account that some of Spinoza's ideas are continually revived to serve as either the subject of criticism or the source material for the creation of new concepts, thus serving philosophy at every stage of its development. Such fruits of philosophical research subsequently serve science as such. Spinoza is one of the thinkers whose work remains noteworthy today, as his understanding of the world represents a complex interweaving of ontological and epistemological ideas, within the context of which a corresponding human figure, with its soul, body, and social being, is precisely defined. In developing this system, the philosopher often addresses questions that are the most problematic for philosophical science, questions that pit researchers from different fields and even scientific disciplines against each other. In addition to the key philosophical problems, Spinoza's theory contains other, less fundamental but no less significant issues. The interpretation of God, the search for the optimal method of cognition—all these aspects of Spinoza's theory—have been subject to both serious criticism and support. In both cases, Spinoza's views stimulate scholars to think.

Keywords: *Young Spinoza, teaching skills, scientific revolution, supernatural, Theological-Political Treatise, democratic republicanism, Bible critique, political theory*.

The teachings of the great and renowned Dutch philosopher Bemedikt Spinoza are subject to varying interpretations, both in general and in specific areas, such as the formation of a finite world by substance, the relationship between soul and body, the essence of Spinoza's geometry, and others. The main difficulty in evaluating his ideas stems from the fact that the conclusions of many studies are sufficiently substantiated, which points to the inconsistency of Spinoza's teaching itself. As a result, scholarly positions enter into an irreconcilable confrontation, which does not lead to a clarification of Spinoza's conception. It is more constructive, in my opinion, to regard

* **Michiel Leezenberg** is an Associate Professor (UHD) of the Department of Philosophy of the Chair of Philosophy of Science at University of Amsterdam. He is coordinator of the Research Master in Philosophy and the B.A. honors program in Philosophy, and participates in the M.A. program Islam in the Modern World. Email: M.M.Leezenberg@uva.nl. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2269-2728.

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the various interpretations as hypothetical. Since this approach does not constrain the researcher to strictly adhere to Spinoza's text, it allows for the actualization of the Dutch philosopher's legacy through the creative application of his ideas in philosophical thought of the future.

"Spinoza," Bertrand Russell writes in his *History of Western Philosophy*, "is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers; as a natural consequence, he was during his lifetime considered a person of appalling wickedness." (Russell 1945, 569). He adds that he considers Spinoza a greater philosopher than Locke; but as he has had much less influence than the latter, he pays less attention to him.

Russell's elegant formulations show an image of Spinoza that is still dominant today: as an unjustly persecuted secular saint, and as a philosophical loner without many followers. And indeed, in many modern histories of philosophy one finds one variety or other of this image. In the present-day Netherlands, Spinoza is still worshiped as a saint of freedom who stood up against all religious oppression. This present-day saint worship, however, has also produced its critics and iconoclasts. For example, Slavoj Zizek once asked quasi-rhetorically whether it was possible not to love Spinoza – only to proceed to beat him with a Hegelian stick. More recently, authors such as Victor Kal and the Frenchman Henry Mechoulan have argued that Spinoza was not a heroic pioneer of freedom but rather a strongly authoritarian, if not totalitarian thinker (Zizek 2002; Kal 2020; Mechoulan 2023).

But regardless of such disputes, it is clear that Spinoza does not fit well into the existing historiography of modern Western philosophy: according to most textbooks, modern philosophy since Descartes and Locke has been dominated by epistemological questions about the justification of knowledge and the refutation of skepticism on the one hand, and by social contract theories about the origin of societies, justice and freedom on the other. Spinoza certainly does not fit into this pattern. He rejects both the epistemological challenge of skepticism and Descartes's answer to that challenge, the idea of a thinking and therefore existing self, subject or 'I' on which the entire cartesian theory of knowledge is built. Likewise, he rejects the idea of a social contract as the rational basis for a just polity which may be found in his liberal contemporaries Hobbes and Locke (not to mention later thinkers like Rousseau, Kant, Rawls and others).[1]

In recent years, Jonathan Israel has launched a frontal attack on the widespread view that Spinoza has had little influence; for him, the Netherlands, and not London, Paris, or Prussia, was the proper birthplace of the real, 'radical' Enlightenment, and Spinoza was the key figure in this development. His *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) argues that there was a clandestine but influential Enlightenment movement in the Netherlands that was more radical than Descartes, Voltaire and Kant, and that it was Spinoza who stood at the beginning of this movement. In other words: Spinoza was much more influential than has long been assumed.

This is indeed a radically new – and, admittedly, still controversial – view of this philosopher and his historical importance. Israel's great achievement has been to force historians and philosophers who regard Spinoza as an amiable loner to take a fresh

[1] *Political Treatise*, III.13-16; in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, chapter 16, however, he appears to assume or endorse contractarianism.

look at the intellectual history of early modern Europe. Philosophers and historians have criticized *Radical Enlightenment* for presenting Spinoza too unambiguously as a materialist, atheist, feminist and anti-colonial, and for trying to reduce the Enlightenment too much to one man. However, the book was warmly received by the general public, especially in the Netherlands: for many Dutch opinion makers, the attacks by Islamic suicide terrorists against the World Trade Center in New York of September 11, 2001 confirmed a fundamental contrast between the enlightened Netherlands and an Islamic world that "had not yet gone through an Enlightenment." In 2023, newspaper headlines are no longer dominated by the al-Qaeda network but by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza; and public debates no longer focus on Enlightenment and religion, but on gender, diversity, decolonization and slavery. Does Spinoza have anything to say to us about the world of the twenty-first century? According to Israel, he does indeed, if only we correctly understand his life and environment. That is why he has now added a biography of Spinoza to his four breathtakingly lengthy volumes on the Enlightenment: this new book, too, runs to no less than thirteen hundred pages – a size that may put off many potential readers.

One may ask if yet another study of Spinoza's life is really necessary. After all, several good biographies already exist. In 1999, British philosopher Margaret Gullan-Whur published *Within Reason: A Life of Spinoza*, daringly speculating about Spinoza's love life and fiercely criticizing his views on women as problematic even for his own time. These criticisms were generally not appreciated by the – usually male – reviewers. This book, however, was soon overshadowed by Steven Nadler's magisterial *Spinoza: A life* – a wonderfully balanced study, which consistently indicates where the known facts end and the speculations (or mystifications) begin, and which soberly assesses the more problematic aspects of Spinoza's personality and work. In 2018, Nadler published a new edition of this biography, revised in the light of the most recent discoveries.

Israel recognizes the value of Nadler's work, but still sees room for a 'comprehensive and detailed' biography that looks in greater detail at Spinoza's historical and cultural context. At the time, one reviewer had complained at the time that Nadler paid too little attention to Spinoza's 'intellectual biography,' and to the authors who had shaped Spinoza or encouraged his criticisms (Beiser and Hidalgo 1999, 4-5). Israel has taken such objections to heart for his own biography, which indeed has an impressive cast of characters. Despite this avalanche of names, titles and facts, however, a striking amount of Israel's story is still based on guesswork. Where Nadler generally restricts himself to what we can know about Spinoza's views and environment, Israel freely speculates freely about his feelings and intentions, and on occasion even about his 'unconscious motives.' Regularly, he confidently asserts that Spinoza 'undoubtedly' thought this or felt that (Israel 2023, 102, 110, 179, 287, 322, 460, 606). Many of those conjectures are entirely plausible; but they are and remain guesswork.

Such speculative remarks are not mere slips of the pen: clearly, Israel is on a mission. According to him, Spinoza is not only the most radical, most subversive, and most influential, but above all also the most *modern* philosopher of the seventeenth century. In fact, he has consistently and tirelessly been trying to sell this image in all

his earlier four bulky volumes on the Enlightenment, and again in this study. Repeatedly, its pages show a barely concealed irritation at fellow historians and philosophers who still do not get it. It should be noted, however, that here and there, Israel has made significant adjustments to his earlier views of Spinoza. Thus, he no longer calls him an atheist as he did in *Radical Enlightenment*: Spinoza, he now acknowledges, did not reject the 'true religion' (*vera religio*) but only the authoritarian culture of rabbis and theologians. Unfortunately for present-day debates, however, Israel has also toned down his earlier discussions of colonialism and slavery, although this would certainly have been relevant in light of the early Dutch colonization of North and South America, and of the Sephardic Jewish presence in the Brazilian colony. Likewsie, Israel still does not sufficiently recognize that terms such as *philosophy*, *religion* and *democracy* generally mean something very different for Spinoza than they do for us.

Nevertheless, this book has much to offer to patient and persevering readers. Israel makes grateful use of the latest discoveries and insights, such as Leen Spruit's and Pina Totaro's text edition (2011) of the so-called 'Vatican manuscript' of the *Ethics*, which shows small but significant deviations from the previously known text, and Jeroen van de Ven's overview (2022) of all publications by Spinoza that appeared in print in the seventeenth century, often clandestinely and under false title. Strikingly, however, Israel (like Nadler) still pays scant attention to the impressive French tradition of commentaries on and philosophical studies of Spinoza, starting with Martial Guéroult and Alexandre Matheron, and continued more recently by authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey. Had he done so, he could have found some important allies.

Spinoza's exceptional place in early modern philosophy may reflect the exceptional place of the Low Countries in the early modern world.[2] The Netherlands of the seventeenth century CE formed a distinct polity in early modern Europe: unlike most neighboring states, it was a loosely federated mercantile republic rather than a centralized absolute monarchy; and especially during the so-called 'stadtholderless period' (1650-1672), it showed religious pluralism and tolerance unrivalled anywhere else in Western Europe. With its flourishing maritime trade, it was a pioneer of early mercantile capitalism (including, tragically, a leading role in the transatlantic slave trade); and with its stock market, it was a pioneer of the modern financial system. In 1688, the Dutch stadtholder William III played a key role in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution,' characterized by Russell as "the most moderate and successful of all revolutions," which ended a long period of religious conflict and political instability in England, and established early liberalism there as firmly as in the Netherlands (Russell 1945, 604). And in the relatively open society of the early modern Low Countries, philosophers like Descartes and Locke were able to develop, and publish, the radical ideas of works like the *Discourse on Method* and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

But what exactly is the importance of the fact that Spinoza lived in the seventeenth-century republic of the Netherlands? Despite its relative decentralization and tolerance, it certainly was no paradise on earth, even apart from the slave trade that dominates

[2] In fact, a similar point was already made by Negri (1991).

contemporary discussions. It was also plagued by regular uprisings by commoners, and by internal conflicts – between Protestants and Catholics, between Protestants themselves, between Republicans and Orangeists, and so on. Nevertheless, the stadtholderless era in particular was a special, if not unique, experiment in seventeenth-century Europe. While most states were ruled by absolute monarchs and had religious uniformity imposed from above, this merchant republic had a policy of religious pluralism and tolerance. Israel even calls it "Europe's greatest marvel in terms of cultural diversity" and "the world's then philosophical centre" (p. 5).

A Dutch audience will be happy to read such and similar claims; but it should be noted that Dutch tolerance was far from unlimited. Although the Netherlands did not have an Inquisition, it knew of serious cases of religious persecution. For example, Calvinist theologians had works like Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Lodewijk Meyer's *Philosophia scripturae interpres* banned; and in 1668 Adriaan Koerbagh was arrested because of his book *A light shining in dark places*, and imprisoned in the Amsterdam Rasphuis, where he died a year later.

Spinoza, too, was harshly confronted with the very real limits on religious freedom and freedom of expression on several occasions. According to Israel, he actually made a systematic attempt to seek and transgress such boundaries. Whether he was in fact such a subversive thinker may be debated; but clearly, Spinoza did not always adhere to his own motto *caute*, "be careful!" After his 1656 clash with the rabbis, he published the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670, a fierce polemic against the powerful Calvinist theologians; and in 1672, he wanted to stage a public protest against the murder of the De Witt brothers, with a banner on which he had written, in Latin, *ultimi barbarorum* ('the worst of barbarians!'). According to Leibniz, Spinoza was saved from certain death that day by his landlord, who locked him up in his room for his own safety.

Israel is clearly less interested in the chronology of Spinoza's life and experiences than in their philosophical and cultural-historical significance. His first chapters discuss in detail why exactly he was so controversial, what exactly his early posthumous influence was, and what his intellectual backgrounds in the Iberian Jewish community were. It is only after more than a hundred pages that Spinoza's actual life story gets underway. Spinoza was born in 1642 in the Jewish district of Amsterdam, around the corner from where the Rembrandt House still stands today. He grew up in a Sephardic environment in which more Spanish, Portuguese and Hebrew were heard than Dutch. The Jewish quarter was not a ghetto , and Jews in Amsterdam were not required to wear distinctive clothing; but among the Jewish immigrants, the fear of the Inquisition was still very much alive. The temptations of the Dutch gentile environment, and the subsequent arrival of large numbers of Ashkenazim who had fled from Eastern Europe, made the Sephardic community even more closed and conservative. The Sephardic rabbis desperately tried to keep the congregation together, if necessary with harsh measures. With some regularity a *kherem*, a ban or anathema, was pronounced on a straying member.

In 1656, this dubious honor befell Spinoza. Odette Vlessing has argued that Spinoza's anathema was not caused by his philosophical views but by legal and tax-

related haggling; but the text of the kherem points emphatically to Spinoza's "pernicious ideas." In any case, Spinoza was not impressed by the ban. "All the better," was his response, according to legend. Building on this, Israel suggests that Spinoza in fact deliberately provoked a clash with the rabbis and rejected attempts at reconciliation. Reportedly, however, he wrote a Spanish-language *Apologia*; this work has been lost, but parts of it may have ended up in the later *Political-Theological Treatise*.

Around the time of the kherem, Spinoza began the study of Latin, the language in which he would write all his major philosophical writings. His teacher was the ex-Jesuit Franciscus van den Enden, who would later also publish radical pamphlets such as *Vrije Politieke Stellingen* ('Free Political Propositions,' 1665) and *Kort Verhael* ('Short Treatise,' 1662). Early sources mention rumors – or gossip – about an unhappy love that Spinoza is said to have had for Van den Ende's daughter; but unlike Gullan-Whur, Israel does not consider these stories worthy of discussion. Spinoza also had contact at this time with the so-called Collegiants, a liberal Protestant movement that met monthly in classes or 'colleges' in which women were also allowed to participate.

Now the similarities between Spinoza and these contemporaries have long been known and studied; but Israel here as in his earlier works makes the bold statement that Spinoza, and Spinoza alone, is the source of the radical Enlightenment. In other words: according to him, it was not Van den Enden and Koerbagh who helped shape Spinoza's radical ideas, but conversely it was the latter whose ideas triggered the radicalization of his teachers. Spinoza, that is, was not shaped by his teachers, but shaped them.

That is an interesting but debatable statement; oddly, Israel, otherwise rarely at a loss for words, is far too brief here to be convincing. Missing in particular is any discussion of Spinoza's teacher Van den Ende, and in particular of his *Kort verhael*, a pamphlet on the Dutch colonial presence in America. One would have thought that this work is an essential source for comparison with Spinoza's ideas, and an eminently relevant topic for today's world in its own right.

Thus, the main earlier objections to Israel's views of Spinoza remain in place. His needlessly apologetic reading of Spinoza becomes most visible when he tries to justify Spinoza's openly elitist position. For example, Spinoza opens the preface to the *Treatise* with the overtly elitist remark "I do not invite the common people (*vulgus*) to read this book;" according to Israel, however, terms such as *vulgus* and *multitudo* do not refer here, as they usually do, to the commoners or the masses in a sociological sense, but to the 'everyday minds' who – regardless of their social class – follow common opinion rather than reason. Such a reading is rather far-fetched and distorted: here and elsewhere, Spinoza makes it abundantly clear that he has no interest in the lower classes. It was not without reason that he deliberately wrote the *Theological-Political Treatise* in Latin, and fiercely opposed any plans to translate it into Dutch.

Even worse is the fact that Israel simply glosses over Spinoza's ideas about women, only acknowledging in passing that Spinoza mentions an 'automatic' domination of men over women that cannot be philosophically justified. In reality, however, Spinoza specifically and problematically argues that women *naturally* have fewer rights than

men, and that women are incapable of reasonable thinking.[3] Worse, this sexism seems to stem directly from his philosophical views. It is undoubtedly a bit facile to dismiss Spinoza as misogynistic by present-day standards; but to simply conceal such problematic views is the other extreme.

In 1670, the *Theological-Political Treatise* was published anonymously, and with a forged publisher and place of publication. The publication led to angry reactions, and not much later to a formal ban. Opponents described the book as 'plague-bearing' and 'forged in hell,' and its author as 'the most famous and subtle atheist that hell ever vomited out over the earth.' Even Spinoza's potential supporters, such as Remonstrants and Collegians, were troubled by the book. Despite the rapid and drastic repression, Israel argues, it soon gained wide, if clandestine, distribution; according to him, Spinoza's early influence rests more on this book than on the posthumously published *Ethics*. In this context, he devotes a fascinating discussion, largely based on Van der Ven's research, to the clandestine French-language editions of the *Treatise*, under flowery titles such as *The Key to the Shrine* or *Curious Considerations of a Disinterested Mind*.

In 1675, Spinoza made another trip to Amsterdam, in an ultimately futile attempt to publish the *Ethics*. The following year, he met the young Leibniz. He had been in poor health for a long time, and in February 1677 he died, not yet 45 years old. Shortly after his death, the *Opera posthuma* was published, again clandestinely. This collection contained, among other things, the *Ethics* and the unfinished *Political Treatise*. Like the *Theological-Political Treatise*, this publication also led to a huge outcry; but by then, Israel argues, 'Spinozism' had already begun its triumphal march across much of Europe.

The *Theological-Political Treatise* appears to be addressed to moderate theologians; but according to Israel, Spinoza also sought influence among a more worldly audience. In support of this belief, he interprets the latter's move to The Hague in 1670 as an attempt to come closer to the centers of power, in the hope of being able to exert real influence on grand pensionary Johan de Witt's government policy. If true, this would turn Spinoza into a kind of proto-Marx, who not only wanted to understand the world but also to change it, or who at the very least hoped to help shape government policies. Spinoza as an early modern think tank or policy advisor: it is possible, but – once again – mere guesswork, for which not a shred of concrete evidence exists.

This conjecture, however, leads to what is perhaps Israel's most daring statement in a book already full of daring statements: according to him, Spinoza was simply not an academic philosopher, nor did he want to be one. Accordingly, he argues, the academic study of Spinoza places too much emphasis on the role of reason, and too little on the – individual and collective – good life; and as a result, it may be missing an essential aspect of his work. In support of this argument, he adduces, among other things, a discovery from the recently discovered Vatican manuscript of the *Ethics*, which gives *vitalis* instead of *rationalis* in the appendix to book IV[4] (Israel 2023, 1208). While all editions from the *Opera posthuma* onwards give "no life is rational without understanding", the Vatican manuscript reads, according to Dutch translator

[3] *Ethics*, book V, prop. 10 schol.; cf. *Political Treatise* XI.4.
[4] *Ethics*, Book IV, Appendix, point V.

Vermeulen, "no life is vital without understanding," and according to Israel "no life is a life-giving life" or, "a life worth living, without understanding." If *vitalis* is indeed Spinoza's correct term, this does in fact strongly suggest that Spinoza is concerned with philosophy as a (private and public) way of life. With this claim, Israel not only opposes Nadler's view that the *Ethics* only offers an 'egocentric' ethics, and is only supplemented with a social and political component in later treatises: according to him, collective reason as a force for the betterment of society already figures in the *Ethics* as well; but also, and more importantly, he opposes the school tradition that has modern Western philosophy begin with epistemological questions.

Philosophers may object that Israel is really overstepping his boundaries here; but perhaps he is more right here than he thinks. In particular, French thinkers such as Pierre Hadot have argued that premodern philosophy is not an academic discipline but a way of life, and French commentators such as Alexandre Matheron have emphasized the social and political-philosophical dimensions of the *Ethics* (Hadot 2002; Matheron 1969). Israel seems unaware of these French allies; but through this neglect, he does both himself and Spinoza a disservice: if his suggestion that Spinoza was concerned with a way of life rather than with academic metaphysics is anywhere near correct, we need a more radical revision of the received view of Spinoza – and, by extension, of Descartes and others. And indeed, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza characterizes Descartes not primarily as an epistemological or metaphysical innovator, but as a guide to "the right way of living" (*recta vivendi ratio*).[5]

Thus, despite its shortcomings, this biography is a worthy conclusion to Israel's immense revisionist research project on the Enlightenment, which invites criticism and further research. Israel has done his homework; the ball now lies in the court of the historians of philosophy.

Ethics Statement

The author confirms that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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[5] *Ethics*, Book III, preface.

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