

One of the Greatest Epicureans of All?

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Though I've been here a very short time, I've been welcomed so warmly by you all that I feel most comfortable. So much so that I've been emboldened enough to post four articles in four weeks. And shall I now post a fifth? Yes, because I believe it will give you great pleasure. It is one of the talks I delivered to the Rossmoor Atheist Club in the senior community in which I live.

SPINOZA THE MATERIALIST

A few months ago I spoke of a certain sage of ancient Greece, a truth-seeker named Democritus, a materialist philosopher. Today I would like to talk about Spinoza, also a materialist philosopher. I feel passionately that materialism – philosophical and scientific materialism – is the school of thought that we, as atheists and agnostics, must be familiar with. Materialism is a way of looking at the world that makes the most sense to me and I hope it will to you too. And so in the future I hope to discuss the materialism of such thinkers as Epicurus, Lucretius, Cyrano de Bergerac, the French Encyclopedists, Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, and others.

But for today to Spinoza: He was Jewish, born in Amsterdam in 1632, the very same year the Inquisition in Italy denounced Galileo. Spinoza's parents also felt the sting of the heresy hunters, for they had to flee from the Inquisition in Portugal. His parents, Michael and Hanna, settled in the more liberal climate of Holland. Spinoza's father did well in the importing business and was valued by the community. Tragically, Baruch's mother died before the boy turned six.

Gifted intellectually, Baruch studied in the congregation's Talmud Torah school. He was a star pupil and was groomed to be a rabbi. But at seventeen he left his rabbinical studies and worked in the family business.

Did Baruch lose interest in yeshiva studies? He was at an early age obsessed with nature, with science and with philosophy. Before he was twenty Spinoza was familiar with the rationalist and skeptic Rene Descartes. He also studied with Franciscus Van den Enden, an ex-Jesuit, a medical doctor familiar with all of science, and an ardent advocate of democracy. Van den Enden was also deeply irreligious.

Spinoza too grew more and more irreligious, and soon the rabbis who held him as their pet pupil now spoke of his “wrong opinions” and “horrible heresies.” The rabbis offered Spinoza 1,000 florins a year to keep quiet, but he refused.

And so the rabbis - from the Ark in the synagogue of Talmud Torah, the united congregation of the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam - expelled Spinoza from the Jewish community and cursed him as follows:

“By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation. 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. Let God never forgive him his sins. Let the wrath and indignation of the Lord surround him and smoke forever on his head. Let all the curses contained in the book of the Law fall upon him. Let God blot him out of his book. Let God separate him to his own destruction from all the tribes of Israel, and give him for his lot all the curses contained in the Book of the Law...

“And we warn you, that none may speak with him by word of mouth nor by writing, nor show any favor to him, nor be under one roof with him, nor come within four cubits of him, nor read any paper composed by him.”

As he stood and heard this sentence pronounced, Spinoza was not yet twenty-four years old. Spinoza was an outcast, detested and despised. Even his father threw him out of the house.

Please pardon me but I must interject a personal note here, for Spinoza’s story moves me very much. I too was a yeshiva student. I too studied Talmud and Torah all day full-time for eight years at a Hebrew school. I too was the favorite of the rabbis. I was given a scholarship to the big yeshiva in New York City. And like Spinoza I too became an atheist! At thirteen I declared myself an atheist and refused to have a bar mitzvah. No, I was not quite a materialist yet, that had to wait until I met two remarkable teachers in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

But back to Spinoza in Amsterdam, Holland: he had to flee that city for fear he would be killed. He moved to a small village near Leyden where he polished lenses to make a living. Every moment of his spare time he devoted to writing philosophy. His diet for the most part was a bowl of gruel. And yes, even in the sheltered countryside, when he left the poor dwellings in which he managed to survive, he had to look over his shoulder in fear for his safety.

For though Holland was the most liberated nation in Europe at that time, and Article Three of the Union decreed a basic principle of religious toleration, the potent religious faction known as ‘strict’ Calvinists demanded an authorized Church in Holland.

In 1619 they succeeded: Calvinism was recognized as the official religion. But Spinoza did not distance himself from the struggle for freedom of speech and thought. He defended those principles in a 1670 book, the *Treatise on Theology and Politics*. This made him the bitter enemy of the ‘strict’ or ‘precise’ Calvinists. They declared his *Treatise* an “evil and blasphemous book,” a work “spawned in Hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil.” The *Treatise* was in fact banned, and for ever after until he actually died Spinoza was forced to lie low. His great masterpiece the *Ethics* never saw the light of day during his life, so fearful was Spinoza of

the reaction of the Church. Only in 1677, just as Spinoza died, did it appear.

It is hard to appreciate what Spinoza was up against. Dutch officials continually reviled his work. The Synod of the Church called his *Theological-Political Treatise* "as vile and blasphemous a book as the world has ever seen." For many years, Spinoza's reputation was notorious. "A godless man," he was called - "a wicked atheist!" A man who had the heinous impudence to deny human freedom, the divine gift from God to man - man made in God's own image! For many years after his death one could not mention Spinoza's name in proper social circles. As long as a century after his death, according to the German writer Lessing, people treated Spinoza "like a dead dog."

So what was so terrible about his philosophy? What did he say that was so atrocious, so unspeakable?

First of all, Spinoza's philosophy is monist. This is his fundamental concept - monism: all things are basically one. Spinoza departs from the dualism of Descartes. In Descartes' philosophy two worlds exist - a world of nature which is entirely mechanistic, deterministic, and a spiritual world of thought, the mind, a soul, immortality and a benevolent god.

Spinoza maintains that there is only one reality, a single substance that is infinite and eternal, not created by a god as a prime mover outside of the universe. Substance is the cause of itself.

A person's thought is a property of substance just as much as his/her body is. As opposed to Descartes with his scheme of a soul devoid of a body and a body wanting a soul, Spinoza fought for the idea that mind and body are two aspects of one and the same thing. Spinoza taught that nature consists of a system in which everything is determined by law. The entire infinite and eternal universe is Substance. There is no separate spirit world. If we must speak of a god, then it too is Substance.

Yes, God and Nature are one and the same. Spinoza maintained that God and Nature were two names for the same reality. And what is reality? It is a substance that underlies all things.

But what is the nature of this substance? Modern science tells us today that all the organic and inorganic matter we observe in all the universe comes down to molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks, leptons, and so on... These elements underlie all things. Is this the substance Spinoza spoke of?

Yes! Spinoza was essentially a materialist. He was speaking - though he could not know the details - of the same stuff that science speaks of today, 300 years later.

We hear of Spinoza spoken of as a Pantheist. But he was not a pantheist who imagined a god as a mystical force animating the material universe. Spinoza's pantheism is, if truth be told, actual materialism in a very thin disguise. Spinoza fooled nobody in his time and it is a wonder that some are fooled today, 300 years later.

The Substance which underlies the universe Spinoza gives the name 'God.' But in point of fact, to equate God with nature is to do away with God. If God is everywhere, then he is nowhere. This point was not lost on Spinoza's enemies, and they immediately pointed a finger at him as an atheist.

Spinoza said nature is "its own cause" operating by means of its own inherent laws. Spinoza understood thought as a property of highly organized matter. Spinoza said thought is matter that thinks. Spinoza was a materialist and this was well understood by those who could comprehend what he was talking about. When the Jews of Amsterdam excommunicated Spinoza, they charged him with "contempt for the Torah and materialism."

Now again we must defend the good word materialist. Was Spinoza a mean man - a greedy, acquisitive, avaricious person? Did he care only for hoarding money and possessions? Or only for pleasure? Was he that kind of materialist?

Why, Spinoza lived in poor places all his life. He did not even have a wife: he was celibate all his life. His diet for the most part was a bowl of gruel. He turned down a teaching position at the University of Heidelberg so that he might maintain his independence. He polished lenses to make a living and died from a lung disease caused by the glass grindings from his lens making. Baruch Spinoza was only forty-five when he died.

Yes, Spinoza was a materialist in philosophy, but an idealist in life. First of all he was a brave champion of truth - willing to defend his positions no matter what it would cost him. Bertrand Russell referred to Spinoza as the "noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers." Spinoza is said to be the "first major European thinker in modern times to embrace democratic republicanism as the highest and most rational form of political organization" in which all men were equal.

Spinoza called for a government based on common consent, for freedom of thought and speech, and for the equality of women. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy sums up Spinoza as follows: "Baruch Spinoza is one of the most important philosophers - and certainly the most radical - of the early modern period. His extremely naturalistic views on God, the world, the human being and knowledge serve to ground a moral philosophy centered on the control of the passions leading to virtue and happiness. They also lay the foundations for a strongly democratic political thought and a deep critique of the pretensions of Scripture and sectarian religion. Of all the philosophers of the seventeenth-century, perhaps none have more relevance today than Spinoza."

Yes, Spinoza was central to the Enlightenment - to the radical Enlightenment which cast off mysticism and religious revelation in favor of a mechanistic and deterministic philosophy. The radical enlightenment was a powerful weapon against the divine right of kings and all other kinds of privilege. It encouraged free thought, free speech; it encouraged the pursuit of happiness, sexual fulfillment, and freedom from fear of hell and punishment after death.

Spinoza's ideas are the basis for our modern, secular life of today. Spinoza's ideas affected not only intellectuals and academics but also so-called common people of his time and ours.

"It is worthy of note," wrote Hegel, "that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy." Not only Hegel, but Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, and Marx were much influenced by Spinoza.

The portrait of Baruch Spinoza, known both as the "Greatest Jew" and the "Greatest Atheist," is featured on the 1000 Guilder banknote. The highest and most prestigious scientific prize in the Netherlands is named the Spinozapremie (Spinoza Award) honoring the great materialist philosopher.

In my next talk I would like to present a paper on one of greatest materialist philosophers of all time - Epicurus.

