

One of the Greatest Epicureans of All?

Post by “Cyrano” of February 8, 2024 at 6:06 PM

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.



Post by "Cassius" of February 8, 2024 at 8:18 PM

As always your writing is excellent Cyrano, and that was very enjoyable to read!

Do we have specific commentary by Spinoza about Epicurus? Not every materialist qualifies as an Epicurean, as the Epicureans displayed in the criticism of Democritus. Where would Spinoza fit in relation to Democritus in terms of skepticism and determinism, two anathemas to

Epicurus? I am certainly aware of Spinoza's reputation but have never studied him closely.

Post by “Cyrano” of February 8, 2024 at 9:41 PM

Thanks, Cassius, for your kind words about my writing. If it reads well it's because it had to sound well. It was originally a talk I gave to fifty atheists. It was of necessity dramatic.

Spinoza an Epicurean? The question is much discussed on Google. If we search for “Spinoza, Epicurus,” we find many, many entries. Most are by and about Dimitris Vardoulakis, Greek philosopher and Associate Professor of philosophy in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University.

Spinoza the Epicurean and *Spinoza Now* are titles of his books and essays.

A quote from one of one above: “The kind of materialism that I ascribe to Spinoza is epicureanism. Like all materialisms, epicureanism in Spinoza includes the rejection of creation ex nihilo. Specifically, in Spinoza this takes the form of the affirmation of a substance outside of which nothing exists, or his so-called monism.”

Another: “The major source of Spinoza's materialism is the Epicurean tradition that re-emerges in modernity when manuscripts by Epicurus and Lucretius are rediscovered.”

We are told by one reviewer that “Vardoulakis offers a fascinating account of the dynamic interaction of Epicurean themes within Spinoza's thought.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2024 at 9:24 AM

I will have to check into Vardoulakis so thank you. In the meantime I skimmed through Wikipedia, and rather than saying that Spinoza was among the greatest Epicureans of all, I have to begin to question whether Spinoza should be considered an Epicurean at all. Before I go further, nothing I am about to write takes away from my praise of your writing or the benefit that discussing this brings to us here in the forum. Distinguishing others who did not claim forthrightly to be Epicurean from those who did helps us understand the differences in ideas much better. Right now I don't know what Spinoza said himself about Epicurus, but the best way to attack these questions is to lay out the ideas of Epicurus and see how many of them and to what extent Spinoza (or anyone else) agreed. Here's a start:

Epicurus	Spinoza	Rating
1. No Thing Can Be Created From Nothing	1. As a materialist, it appears that Spinoza may perhaps agree with this statement, but it appears Spinoza was a monist rather than an atomist, and there are profound implications to that difference.	
2. Nature Has No Gods Over Her	2. Spinoza apparently said that Nature IS God, much like the Stoics, which would be very different from Epicurus' clear denial of supernatural gods.	
3. <u>Death Is Nothing To Us</u>	3. Spinoza seems to agree with Epicurus that there is no life after death, but there appears to be a question as to whether Spinoza and Epicurus advised us to think about death while we are alive. We'd have to clarify where both the Stoics and Epicurus stood on this as well. Is the "meditate mortem" phrase Stoic, or Epicurean, or both? Don has posted on this Article : "By contrast, Spinoza's "free person"—the ideal individual all of whose thoughts and actions are under the guidance of reason, not passion—rarely, if ever, thinks about death. In one of the more striking propositions of his philosophical masterpiece, the <i>Ethics</i> , Spinoza notes that "the free person thinks least of all of death." This is because the free person knows that there is nothing to think about. They understand that there is no afterlife, no post-mortem realm of reward and punishment, no world-to-come. When a person dies, there is, for that person, nothing. In this respect, Spinoza's view is closer to that of Epicurus."	

Epicurus

Spinoza

Rating

4. He Who Says "Nothing Can Be Known" Knows Nothing.

4. My first reading indicates that Spinoza may have been a skeptic, and that he may be closer to Plato's idea forms than to Epicurus' sensation-based canonic. [Wikipedia](#): The *Ethics* has been associated with that of [Leibniz](#) and [René Descartes](#) as part of the [rationalist](#) school of thought,^[102] which includes the assumption that ideas correspond to reality perfectly, in the same way that mathematics is supposed to be an exact representation of the world. The writings of [René Descartes](#) have been described as "Spinoza's starting point".^[99] Spinoza's first publication was his 1663 geometric exposition of proofs using [Euclid](#)'s model with definitions and axioms of Descartes' [Principles of Philosophy](#). Following Descartes, Spinoza aimed to understand truth through logical deductions from 'clear and distinct ideas', a process which always begins from the 'self-evident truths' of [axioms](#).^[109]

[Overview of Spinoza's Ethics](#): "From a number of intuitive definitions, axioms, and postulates, Spinoza (1632-1677) seeks by means of the geometric method of proof to understand the essential nature of what is reality from what he believes to be clear and distinct ideas. He views the unity of Nature and God as the only existent uncaused substance and the necessary and efficient cause of all other things. Since God is the same thing as Nature, he concludes by means of Euclid's method of mathematical deduction that mind and the body are two aspects of the same thing: the connection among ideas map exactly to the connection among physical entities."

5. All Good And Evil Consists In Sensation

5. To be determined. This looks good: "Knowledge of good and evil is nothing other than the emotion of pleasure or pain insofar as we are conscious of it." — [Proposition 8, Ethics VI, Spinoza](#). However to be more confident we would need to pin down Spinoza on "virtue."

6. [Pleasure Is the Guide of Life](#)

6. To be determined.

Epicurus**Spinoza****Rating**

7. **There Is No Such Thing As Absolute Justice.** 7. [Spinoza On Justice](#): "Spinoza studies have paid little attention to the concept of justice for centuries. However, he refers to it quite often in different contexts, especially in his mature texts. More specifically, he defines it as synonymous with *sum cuique tribuere*, even though he fails to provide a reasonable account of how this traditional legal expression fits into his philosophical system. This article shows that there is a relevant philosophical dimension in Spinoza's treatment of the *sum cuique* that emerges out of his notion of equality. The main section identifies the connection between Spinoza's references on justice as *sum cuique* and the different conceptions of equality that are inherent in his system (an ontological, a metaphysical, a productive (ethical), a legal, and a political equality). The conclusion tries to answer the question of whether such an understanding of the *sum cuique* as equality constitutes a theory of justice or not." **Definition:** *Sum cuique tribuere* is a Latin phrase that means to give each person what they deserve. It was one of the three general precepts in Roman law, which required people to not harm others, live honestly, and give everyone what they are owed.
8. [There Is No Necessity To Live Under The Control Of Necessity.](#) 8. On first glance it appears that Spinoza was a strong determinist. Cite: [Baruch Spinoza, "Human Beings are Determined"](#) Abstract: Baruch Spinoza argues against the doctrine of free will as a result of demonstrating that the activity of our minds is equivalent to the activity of our bodies. The mind is more or less active (or contemplative) in accordance with the body's activity or sensing.

I will work on updating this when I have more time to go through some of the source materials, but if Spinoza's main resemblance to Epicurus was that he was a "materialist" (and a monist, not an atomist, at that) then I am inclined to think at the moment that a good case could be made that on most core issues of philosophy, Spinoza may not have been an Epicurean at all.

We'll see, but I want to repeat that going through philosophers like this and examining how they compare to Epicurus on points of doctrine is a very helpful exercise.

I am sure the first drafts of this chart will need massive revision as my background in Spinoza is close to zero other than being aware of his name. I will update the chart as I have time and as others may provide cites.

Post by “Martin” of February 9, 2024 at 9:57 AM

Materialism and monism should be compatible. According to Epicurus, the soul is closely associated with the body. This is monism, too, in my understanding. There may be other aspects of monism which are not directly related to Epicurus' philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2024 at 10:08 AM

[Quote from Martin](#)

Materialism and monism should be compatible. According to Epicurus, the soul is closely associated with the body. This is monism, too, in my understanding. There may be other aspects of monism which are not directly related to Epicurus' philosophy.

Yes it would be useful to get a clear fix on Epicurus and monism. While Epicurus would appear to clearly hold that the soul/spirit is physical, this group of "monists" below is far from Epicurean. It is tempting to say that while both have materialism in common, Atomism is the OPPOSITE of monism, with many and varied implications of that difference. Might it be possible that an equal or better case could be made that Spinoza was among the greatest STOICS of them all?

[Monistic philosophers](#)

Pre-Socratic[[edit](#)]

While the lack of information makes it difficult in some cases to be sure of the details, the following [pre-Socratic philosophers](#) thought in monistic terms:^[25]

- [Thales](#): Water
- [Anaximander](#): *Apeiron* (meaning 'the undefined infinite'). Reality is some, one thing, but we cannot know what.
- [Anaximenes of Miletus](#): Air
- [Heraclitus](#): Change, symbolized by fire (in that everything is in constant flux).
- [Parmenides](#): Being or Reality is an unmoving perfect sphere, unchanging, undivided.^[26]

Post-Socrates[[edit](#)]

- Neopythagorians such as [Apollonius of Tyana](#) centered their cosmologies on the [Monad](#) or One.
 - [Stoics](#) taught that there is only one substance, identified as God. [\[27\]](#)
 - Middle Platonism under such works as those by [Numenius](#) taught that the Universe emanates from the Monad or One.
 - [Neoplatonism](#) is monistic. [Plotinus](#) taught that there was an ineffable transcendent god, 'The One,' of which subsequent realities were emanations. From The One emanates the Divine Mind ([Nous](#)), the Cosmic Soul ([Psyche](#)), and the World ([Cosmos](#)).
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Post by “Cyrano” of February 9, 2024 at 4:22 PM

Wow! What a "chart" you created, Cassius. So many questions now that need answers, so many problems to solve.

But for the problem you produced for me I have a simple solution. I need only make the minutest change in my article: I'll merely add a question mark at the end of the title.

Seriously, I'm happy that so much mental stimulation was inspired by my article. It was, I remind you, originally a talk I gave fifteen years ago. It's purpose was to build up materialist thinking among a group of atheists. At that time I could not imagine that so many years later I would become so embroiled with such knowledgeable Epicureans.

I fear I'm out my depth now. As I say, I'm very new here. To read all the articles on this website would take more time than I have left. (At 84, I betcha I'm the oldest guy here.) But oh on what an intellectual/philosophical adventure you are taking me. Thank you very much.

Post by “Cassius” of February 9, 2024 at 4:47 PM

[Quote from Cyrano](#)

But for the problem you produced for me I have a simple solution. I need only make the minutest change in my article: I'll merely add a question mark to the title

I was thinking of asking you to do that and I appreciate you did it without asking! :-). Your good humor is very welcome!

Post by “Godfrey” of February 9, 2024 at 5:31 PM

This is a fascinating topic about which I know nothing. Thanks [Cyrano](#) for posting and [Cassius](#) for running down the questions that were going through my mind!