

Baruch Spinoza: Prophet of a Modern Worldview

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Abstract

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), one of the colossal figures of Western philosophy, has been underappreciated. Few today recognize his contribution to global civilization, especially his focus on human rights and democratic values. His concern for the psychological health of people is also unique among modern philosophers. In some of this he followed various Greek philosophers, insisting that the pursuit of meaning and understanding must also be a social good, even transformative for those engaged in it. His value-system came from his Jewish upbringing, however, where the methodical study of the Torah, Talmud, and Kabbalah was also meant to be elevating. Spinoza took this approach, along with concepts from philosophers of his day, and applied them universally, believing that an enlightened humanity would create a more peaceful world (or at least one where religious conflict is reduced). He also answered the question of what kind of world would emerge when religion, politics, and even ethics were based on empirical objectivity rather than on religion or ideology. A rational world, he asserted, would be a much better one for everyone. In this article I will review a little of Baruch Spinoza's major ideas, before considering his two most important works: *Treatise on Theology and Politics* (1670) and *Ethics* (1677). Spinoza's view of the divine is singularly distinctive in world history and staggering in its scope. I will consider a few of the ways in which he may have developed this and how his views completely remove the divine from dogmatic disputes.

Key Words

Baruch Spinoza, Rene Descartes, the Enlightenment, the Inquisition, Kabbalah, Ethics, Treatise of Theology and Politics, human rights, tolerance, democracy, religious conflict, Maimonides, free-will, determinism, predestination

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1. Introduction

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), “Spinoza” meaning “thorn” in Portuguese, has not received the credit he deserves for tipping religion, political science, and ethics toward a more rational approach. Few have had such a pervasive influence on the fundamental ways that people look at life. One reason his role has been understated — even minimized — is that he was not a part of intellectual circles of his day; neither had he ever held an academic post nor had he ever attended college. Further, he was a Jew, branded an outsider by both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity, often deemed unworthy of consideration for this reason alone. In fact, he was tainted by accusations that he was both an atheist and a purveyor of immorality for well over one hundred years — nothing in these accusations could have been farther from the truth. The dissenting sects, however — Quakers, Mennonites, Anabaptists, among others — embraced him, for they were also outsiders. These groups, with a few intellectuals of the time, are the reason his work got any kind of hearing at all.¹⁾ As his books became more widely distributed after his death, despite cross-the-board bans on them — he was even on the Roman Catholic Church’s Index of Forbidden Books (it was finally abolished in 1966) — intellectuals appropriated his ideas as their own. Spinoza, however, would not have cared much about this. From early adulthood he had renounced any desire for recognition. His most famous statement resonates today, a prescription, in fact, for emotional well-being: “He who loves God cannot strive that God should love him in return” (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:372, Part V, Prop. 19).

Spinoza’s most important contribution, which in effect makes him a father of the modern world, was his seminal outlines of how democratic systems should function, with the separation of Church and State to deal with religious intolerance, since democracy can only thrive in an atmosphere where tolerance is a public virtue and where freedom of the speech is a given.²⁾ His ideas have resurfaced again and again over the centuries, influencing thinkers as different as John Locke (1632-1704) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). The First Amendment of the United States’ Constitution is Spinoza’s great gift to the nation’s founding:³⁾

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) wrote, “There is no other philosophy than the philosophy of Spinoza” (Lessing, quoted by Israel, 2010:71). Lessing saw that Spinoza offered humanity a way to raise its vision. This, in effect, was a bridge from the Hebrew Bible to universal justice (Carroll, 2001:406). Spinoza indeed remains a positive force, a guiding angel if you will, of all that is humane and tolerant in the world today, one that will continue to travail until his goals are realized in greater fullness. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) put his contributions this way:

Spinoza is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme. As a natural consequence, he was condemned during

his lifetime and for a century after his death, as a man of appalling wickedness. He was born a Jew, but the Jews excommunicated him. Christians abhorred him equally; although his whole philosophy is dominated by the idea of God, the orthodox accused him of atheism. Leibniz, who owed much to him, concealed his debt, and carefully abstained from saying a word in his praise; he even went so far as to lie about the extent of his personal acquaintance with the heretic Jew (Russell, 1946:569).

Spinoza, who published under his Latinized name “Benedictus,” (Latin was then the language of scholarship) believed that by shining a light on smothering misconceptions and superstitions (religious and political), human life could not only improve but also soar. Humanity will find liberation only through rationality, he said, despite the fact that he was a devotee of what he called the “true religion.” This gave him a special mission among Enlightenment thinkers: to liberate God from religion. The times he lived in were filled with violence over religion, with Roman Catholicism pitted against Protestantism mostly (and vice versa), but also conflict among various Protestant sects, with the horror of each executing the other for heresy. He offered remedies for this spiral of self-destruction; in fact, he wanted them to return to the Bible’s message of love (Baruch Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, 1677:10).

As a youth, Spinoza encountered a host of dynamic thinkers — mostly from Great Britain, Germany, and France — who formulated new ways to think, to live, to govern: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), Francis Bacon (1562-1616), and René Descartes (1596-1650), to name a few. They brought a fresh vision for a brave, new society, ideas that continue everywhere today, especially in the principles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). These thinkers, with the social stance of the Hebrew prophets, set him aflame. It was no doubt an exciting time to be alive — with ideas for a rational society offering unlimited possibilities for civilization.

The Enlightenment (1637-1804) had revived ideas that had long been dormant, but had resurfaced throughout history in more modest manifestations since the Greek philosophers first articulated them.⁴⁾ In fact, the “discovery” of Greek philosophers’ texts in 1236, when Spain conquered Moorish Córdoba, had sparked this sweeping revolution. “In the Latin West,” wrote Richard Rubenstein, “Aristotle’s recovered work was the key to further developments that would turn Europe from a remote, provincial region into the very heartland of an expansive global civilization” (Rubenstein, 2003:5).

The Enlightenment asked threatening questions: What is the most humane and rational way to organize society? What would it mean for a government to be based on choice by the people? Could society have cohesion without the Church (or religion) at its center dictating its moral prescriptions? Could society govern itself without a hereditary aristocracy? Democracy, of course, developed out of the Enlightenment’s vision of a government based on rational consent, yet in Spinoza’s time this was seen as ludicrously naïve (only rare examples were available then: the city-republics of Genoa, Venice, Pisa, among others). Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), the historical philosopher, described the power of the Enlightenment and the negative reactions to it:

The proclamation of the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences, based on observation as the sole reliable method of knowledge, and the consequent rejection of the authority of revelation, sacred writings, and their accepted interpreters, tradition prescription, and every

form of non-rational and transcendent sources of knowledge, was naturally opposed by the Churches and religious thinkers of many persuasions...

It was further believed that methods similar to those of Newtonian physics, which had achieved such triumphs in the realm of inanimate nature, could be applied with equal success to the fields of ethics, politics and human relationships in general (Berlin, 1997:243-244).

Distressed especially with how society is manipulated by religious and political authorities, Spinoza was first to make this valiant attempt to take mathematics (from Descartes) to other fields for greater objective accountability (Israel, 2010:1-2). That is to say, his purpose was to protect the general population. This mission, of course, could only be partially realized. Spinoza has been called the first “modern person” for fusing all the progressive ideas around him into something uniquely his own. This remains his lasting legacy.

What motivates a person to challenge the injustices of the existing social structure? As Miguel Cervantes’ (1547-1616) Don Quixote, who had read so many books on Knight-errantry and chivalrous deeds that he transported himself into an alternative reality, Spinoza, too, has that Don Quixote element in his psyche for believing that ideas alone could change the world. Also, as Don Quixote, Spinoza was mocked, trampled on, and suffered privation as he stood up for the poor, the lower classes, the disenfranchised, since only by their inclusion could humanity progress. The odious curse of class structure, of ingrained social inequality, of an aristocracy that has the perceived right to rule — with the notion that the divine sanctions this unjust social structure — needed to come tumbling down. His ideas are radical, even subversive, the reason why in 1678 the Dutch States-General, among the most tolerant societies of that day, banned all of his work (Ibid., 2010:22).

Spinoza matters today as anti-democratic forces, authoritarian to the core, have lifted their ugly heads among “democratic” societies in many parts of the world, threatening to overturn the tenuous rights that people have gained in the post-war period. In an age of grave uncertainty from infectious disease and climate change, rife with group-based conspiracy theories and flights of fantasy that deny even simple objective truths, Spinoza remains the spokesperson for objectivity, democratic engagement, tolerance, and human freedom. He affirmed this in his *Treatise on Theology and Politics* (1670), “Everyone is by absolute natural right the master of his own thoughts, and thus utter failure will attend any attempt in a commonwealth to force men to speak only as prescribed by the sovereign despite their different and opposing opinions... this freedom is of the first importance in fostering the sciences and the arts, for only those whose judgment is free and unbiased can attain success in these fields” (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by William Smith, 2018:55-60).

In this article, I will offer an overview of Spinoza’s life and his major ideas. Ideas, with Spinoza’s among the most powerful, sparked the forward motion of human life to the peak it is now at. Spinoza may yet keep it all from falling apart with his injunctions that humanity has all it needs, especially compassion and empathy, to collectively address climate change, the violence of war, and persistent assaults against democracy.

2. Spinoza's Life

Not a great deal is known of Baruch Spinoza. Much, though, is known of his culture. As so many towering historical figures, Jesus of Nazareth and William Shakespeare among them, biographers generalize from what is known of the culture to the person, to augment meager information, and what would have been normal for him or her in that cultural setting. When perusing a biography of Spinoza, the reader encounters: he “may” have done this and he “may” have done that, he “probably” did this and he “probably” did not do that. This has value, of course, since learning of a cultural setting, and how it may have shaped people in indelible ways, is part of a person's life.

Spinoza, historians know, was the ultimate “outsider.” For hundreds of years people have taken both solace and inspiration from this. Sephardic Judaism, the culture he grew up in, is the key to understanding him, which I will adumbrate a bit below. It thrived in Moorish Spain for five-hundred years and contributed immensely to the fields of medicine, mathematics, poetry, and philosophy (Goldstein, 2006:97). Beginning in about 711, and called the Golden Age by Jews, it elevated a dynamic learning orientation that Spinoza had internalized. Unlike other mysterious figures of history, however, Spinoza kept up a lively correspondence with dissenting Christians and other rebels and intellectuals of his time, who saved his letters. These are punctuated, unfortunately, with gaps of many years here and there. He also wrote a little about himself in his books; these offer clues to his inner life.⁵⁾

Spinoza seemed to know early-on the direction his life must take — which voice to follow, so to speak. He needed to avoid all institutional authority, whether governmental, financial, religious, or educational. He intuited their corrupting influences, their perpetuation of fallacies, their twisted logic of whom it rewards with wealth and renown, even as they demand strict conformity. He endured the sharp stings of misfortune for this, since it essentially left him without defenses in a tumultuous world where religious conflict was rife. Above all, he valued the freedom to think and to write, so he lived as independently as possible, relied on as few people as possible, even, for the most part, declining any offers of financial support (Nadler, 2018:304-306). All his adult life he rented rooms at boarding houses, supporting himself as a “private-contractor,” to use a modern term, working out of his room tutoring students and grinding and polishing lenses for microscopes and telescopes (he died suddenly of a lung ailment when he was only forty-four years old, no doubt from breathing the glass particles and dust from polishing lenses).⁶⁾ Here is a short account, written by his friend Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), himself an extraordinary thinker of the time, of Spinoza in his prime:

He felt so strong an inclination to enquire after truth, that he renounced the world in a manner, the better to succeed in that enquiry. Not contented to free himself from all manner of business, he also left Amsterdam, because the visits of his friends too much interrupted his speculations, and retired into the country, where he meditated without any hindrance, and made microscopes and telescopes. He was so well pleased with meditating, and putting his meditations into order, and communicating them to his friends, that he spent very little time in any recreation, and was sometimes three whole months without stepping out of doors.

Though he lived a very retired life, his name and his reputation flew everywhere. Free-thinkers resorted to him from all parts. The Palatine court desired to have him, and offered him a professorship of Philosophy at Heidelberg. But he refused it, as being little consistent with his great desire of inquiring into truth without any interruption (Pierre Bayle, c. 1700, quoted by Clare Carlisle, 2021:18).

Spinoza was not idiosyncratic, so obvious in such artists as Dante (1265-1321) and John Milton (1608-1674). From his letters and from accounts of people who knew him well, historians find a serene, peace-loving, outgoing person who enjoyed the company of others, one who shied away from conflict and confrontation (he never responded directly to any personal criticism of his work).⁷ In spite of his austere independence, Spinoza was certainly not emotionally cold or withdrawn. His letters are full of warm affection for his friends; his deep involvement in the Collegiate circles, which I will outline a bit below, shows he was never anti-social. He thrived on the rigorous intellectual discussions there. His only vice seems to have been smoking a pipe. Nothing in his letters shows he was unhappy, resentful, or anxious. In short, he was contentedly devoted to thought and to furthering his understanding.

The few accounts of him ever getting angry were when people (especially religious leaders) called him “an atheist” (Nadler, 2018:288-289). This he vehemently denied (the word “atheist” at the time meant a non-partisan who mocked religious tradition).⁸ Spinoza believed in spiritual realities, not in organized religion — though he certainly was not anti-religious — in what he called “the true religion” or the “true good” (Carlisle, 2021:29-30). He was theocentric, then, without being theological. The German poet Novalis (1772-1801) even called him “God intoxicated” (Goldstein, 2006:12). In *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (1662), he wrote of a conversion experience. As all conversions, his included a transformation of value priorities:

By persistent mediation, I came to the conclusion that, if only I could resolve wholeheartedly to change my plan of life, I would be giving up certain evils for a certain good... For though I perceived these things so clearly in my mind, I still could not, on that account, put aside all greed, desire for sensual pleasure, and love of esteem. I saw this, however: that so long as the mind was turned toward these thoughts, it was turned away from those things, and was thinking seriously about the new goal. That was a great comfort for me. For I saw that those evils would not refuse to yield to remedies. And although in the beginning these intervals were rare, and lasted a very short time, nevertheless, after the true good became more and more known to me, the intervals became longer and more frequent (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by Clare Carlisle, 2021:26).

Spinoza remains an enigma. How do geniuses gain such deep insight with so little formal education? Why do some have a capacity for greater understanding than others of the time, or of any time? In fact, his formal education was rather slight (records show he studied only until he was fourteen-years-old, about the same as William Shakespeare), in spite of living in a culture that valued education as supreme. He had to leave his studies at Talmud Torah School around 1646 (Nadler, 2018:75) to work in the family business, importing dried fruits and nuts, after his brother, Isaac, died suddenly (Ibid., 93). Historians

speculate that he continued advanced studies at the Yeshiva (“Sitting” in Hebrew, a school that focuses on rabbinic studies), connected with Beth Israel Synagogue, although this is by no means certain. When his father died in 1654, Spinoza was twenty-one and he and his brother began to run the business on their own. He never studied again formally, except with Latin tutors and at Collegiate sessions, which were akin to organized discussion groups today (Deleuze, 1988:6) (without the support of the Collegiate members, many say, Spinoza would not have been able to publish his work, Israel, 2010:24).⁹ He may have taken a few classes at the University of Leiden, although no records show his enrollment. But Spinoza, as the supreme autodidact, read voraciously everything he could get his hands on (Amsterdam was the perfect place for him, for in Spinoza’s time it had over four-hundred book stores, Goldberg, 2006:210).

From his late teenage years, he had become associated with radical or dissenting Christians — Quakers, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Remonstrants — Remonstrants were dissidents who split off from the Dutch Reformed Church — through the Collegiates (Colleges), for while the Dutch government would not allow them to have public worship services (this was only for the Dutch Reform Church), it did allow them to have Bible discussion groups (these people he must have met at bookshops). All followed Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), whose teachings centering on “free-will” and “good works” were in sharp opposition to the “faith alone” that Martin Luther (1483-1546) preached and the “predestination in salvation” of John Calvin (1509-1564). (Spinoza, as we will see, turned away from free-will, seeing it as illusory, and came down squarely on “determinism” in all aspects of life). Though Spinoza associated with dissenting sects in the Collegiates and established abiding friendships with some, he never accepted Christianity — becoming a Christian may have protected him from the charge of “atheism,” a word he so detested. In fact, he could not accept its literalism (Judaism may have betrayed him, as we will see below, but he would not betray Judaism by becoming a Christian convert, Carlisle, 2021:15). By associating with the dissenting sects, however, he placed himself among the most progressive, humane, and tolerant people of the Netherlands. He admired their spiritual impulses, their absolute devotion to the divine, which he took as his own. God was central to the dissenters. God was central to Spinoza too, though, as with everything he touched, he reshaped even theology into something uniquely his own:

If a man comes to love God, who always is and remains immutable, it is impossible for him to fall into this bog of passions. And therefore, we maintain it as a fixed and unshakeable rule, that God is the first and only cause of all our good, and one who frees us from all our evil (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:223).

A “stoic” at heart, with Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) as his inspiration, Spinoza followed his injunctions for depending on one’s own inner resources to lead to truth and to purge oneself of toxic emotions — happiness is found in living a virtuous life (Nadler, 2020:63-64). This, of course, was the spirituality of the dissenting sects, such as the Quakers, that he associated with. All agreed that one must follow the “inner light,” or “Christ within,” rather than institutional dogmas to arrive at truth. Here, Spinoza anticipates Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1803-1882) view of institutional religion: “As men’s prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted by Harold

Bloom, 2002:341). Spinoza wrote it is the divine that "... frees us from sadness, despair, envy, fright, and other evil passions which... are the real hell itself... [God] who is himself the greatest good and through whom all things that have any essence — and we who live in him — are what they are" (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:224). This echoes the New Testament's Acts of the Apostles 17:28 (New International Version): "For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'"

Spinoza, aged twenty-three, suffered the fate of so many original thinkers — Banishment. The Beth Israel Synagogue issued a *ḥērem*, or excommunication, against him, forcing him out of a community he had been a part of all his life. What effect this had on him one can only imagine. Both his parents were by then dead, so he may not have felt a connection with the community any longer. Yet, to be rejected by your own people, and chased out of your own culture, would be for most a wound that could never heal. Was this the source of his solitude and his virtual turning away from most worldly endeavors? If the synagogue's goal was to force him to repentance, this did not work.¹⁰ It no doubt reaffirmed his sense of religion's petty reactionary forces, with its ludicrous notions of doctrinal purity. A friend reported Spinoza's reaction when he heard of the excommunication, "All the better they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal; but, since they want it that way, I enter gladly on the path that is opened to me, with the consolation that my departure will be more innocent than was the exodus of the early Hebrews from Egypt" (quoted by Rebecca Goldstein, 2006:252).

The synagogue elders, who were investigating rumors of his association with radicals, felt obliged to look into his beliefs more carefully, mostly to avoid retaliation from city authorities for harboring a heretic. At any time during their questioning, Spinoza, using a little diplomacy, could have denied he held any beliefs inimical to Judaism. The fact that he did not conform shows a great deal about his character: Firmness of will with absolute honesty. He refused to back down when it came to personal autonomy, his right to think for himself.¹¹ The elders come down harshly on him — this bewilders historians even today since he was yet to publish anything — with the most severe *ḥērem* possible, for turning "God into a philosophical abstraction":¹²

Cursed be he by day, and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he rises up; cursed be he when he goes out, and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not pardon him; the anger and wrath of the Lord will rage against this man and bring up him all the curses that are written in this Book of the Law, and may the Lord destroy his name from under the Heavens, and may the Lord separate him to his injury from all the tribes of Israel, with all the curses of the firmament, which are written in this Book of the Law.

We order that nobody should communicate with him orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof... or read anything composed or written by him. (The *ḥērem* against Baruch Spinoza as quoted by Abba Eban, 1984:205-206).

Israel Réval, a Spinoza scholar, searched through Inquisition documents in Spain in hopes of locating a

little of Spinoza's "missing years," in this case the four years after his banishment when almost nothing is known. He found an obscure document bearing Spinoza's name. In 1658, Fray Tomás Solano y Robes (1627-1659), a Dominican priest and an agent of the Inquisition of Spain — this was after Portugal and Spain had united in a single kingdom under the Hapsburgs — questioned Spinoza as to his theological beliefs when Solano stopped-over in Holland for two months on his way from London to Spain.¹³⁾

The Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834), then, continued its sinister reach even into Protestant countries. It had somehow believed that Spinoza's soul belonged to it, since he was a child of Marrano Jews — of course the Inquisition had no jurisdiction in Holland. In fact, Spinoza, who was happy to talk to Solano, who had sought him out, may not have known that this conversation would be reported to the Inquisition.¹⁴⁾ Solano, the record shows, wrote that Spinoza is "content to maintain the heresy of atheism, since [he] felt that there is no God except philosophically speaking... and that souls died with bodies, and that faith was unnecessary" (Solano as quoted by James Carroll, 2001:406-407).¹⁵⁾ Solano, of course, would not have understood Spinoza's nuanced position — he could only record statements that in his mind contradicted the set boundaries of the Church of Rome's doctrine, which since the Reformation threatened its social dominance of Europe had become brazenly narrow (in fact, almost anyone could be charged with heresy). This bizarre episode shows Spinoza telling authority figures the truth as he saw it, as was his habit (Goldstein, 2006:132). One may ask: Is it wise to be open about your beliefs in a time when people are executed for them? Yet, Spinoza would not be Spinoza without this quality of absolute openness.

Not that Holland was much more tolerant, at least by today's standards. In 1670, the Calvinist Synod of North Holland banned Spinoza's recently published *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, where he presented personal interpretations of the Bible (the right to interpret the Bible for yourself is a touchstone of Reformation principles), human rights, constitutional and secular government, and the importance of everyone following his or her conscience. The Synod declared it was "forged in hell by a renegade Jew and the Devil" (Carroll, 2001: 411). Brutal and violent antisemitism that blamed Jews for all the evil of the world took on renewed ferocity during the German Crusade (1096), launched by Pope Urban II (c. 1035-1099), and never really went away — though there were periods of dormancy. Spinoza knew that antisemitism could be used against him to discredit his ideas.¹⁶⁾ In 1772, as one small example, Voltaire (1694-1778) wrote a ditty of Spinoza, "Then a little Jew, with a long nose and wan complexion... walking with measured tread, approached the great Being, 'Excuse me,' he said, speaking very low. 'But I think, between you and me, that you do not exist.'"

In 1619 Calvinists established Reformed Christianity as the religion of the realm.¹⁷⁾ Their hatred of Roman Catholicism, it seems, was part of their motivation for allowing Jews from the Iberian Peninsula to settle in Holland (some among them also wanted to learn Hebrew from the migrants). They were sympathetic, since they saw them as victims of the Church of Rome's cruelty (Carroll, 2001:407), which had forced them to convert to Catholicism on pain of death and even after they converted had expelled them for being Jews (Mazover 2004:67).¹⁸⁾ Called "Marranos," a term meaning "swine" in Castilian Spanish, most were crypto-Jews, those who secretly practiced Judaism at home.¹⁹⁾ Yet, the Dutch government demanded the community follow the Law of Moses strictly — this of course would have consequences for Spinoza — no one should try to convert a Christian to Judaism, and there should be

no intermarriage between Jews and Christians (Nadler, 2018:14).²⁰⁾ This was progress, though, for it was the first time the municipalities allowed a group that was not a Reformed Dutch Church to worship publicly and legally (Goldstein, 2006:117).²¹⁾ Spinoza's father, Michael de Spinoza, immigrated to Amsterdam in 1624 (Nadler, 2018:38).²²⁾

One should remember that freedom of speech and freedom of religion were yet to be articulated into law anywhere, so no one had these rights (only monarchs did). The Reformation (1517) by Spinoza's time was over one-hundred-fifty-years old, but Calvinism, a more tolerant version of Protestantism dominated Amsterdam's government. Despite its more international bent, its teachings on a universal humanity, and its generally more humane orientation compared to Luther's teachings, which tended toward Germanic nationalism, Calvinism still had the sharp sting of forcing doctrinal conformity.²³⁾ Calvinist Holland also came down hard on "heretics." Dutch cities still executed them (by drowning) in Spinoza's time — most of its victims were Anabaptists (Casteels, 2021:76-97).²⁴⁾

Spinoza, as a result, attempted to make himself as "impervious" as possible to retaliation, for few could exert any leverage over him. He was not part of any community, tied neither to his Jewish community nor to his family after the *ḥērem*, which had forbidden him to visit. He never owned any property and never married — he seems to have completely foresworn any courtship with women — so he had no family pressures for him to earn a higher income, which would have made him more susceptible to moderating his ideas for the sake of a livelihood. Both financially self-sufficient, though eking out only a meager living, and unaffiliated, he had succeeded in carving out a space for himself in a rather hostile society, hostile at least to freethinkers. His motivation in all this, though, was to free himself as much as possible from worldly attachments for his "meditations." Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) also saw money (and possessions) as an impediment to learning, though he was, unlike Spinoza, fabulously wealthy from an inheritance from his father. He gave all the money up, saying, "If you were going for a long hike up a steep mountain, you would deposit your weighty rucksack at the bottom" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted by Edmunds and Eidinow, 2001:87).²⁵⁾ Wittgenstein, as Spinoza, lived in boarding houses, perhaps he followed Spinoza's example in this.

Since both Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) suffered heart-breaking rejections from women, which spurred them to focus their complete attention on philosophy, some speculate that Spinoza, too, must have suffered in the same manner. Was erotic loss the source of his fierce independence, as it would be for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche? Spinoza does write at length in his *Ethics* of the tortures of romantic love that people are wise to avoid. This seems based on personal experience rather than mere objective observation.²⁶⁾

3. Free-will and determinism

René Descartes (1596-1650), Spinoza's primary philosophical inspiration, focused on mathematics as the way to truth. A French Roman Catholic, he lived most of his adult life in the Netherlands and his ideas were revolutionary, for historians today mark his primal work, *Discourse on Method* (1637), as the beginning of the Enlightenment. Free-will, he believed, was the divine's ultimate gift to humanity, "[Free will was] the noblest thing we can have, since it makes us in a way equal to God... the greatest good we

can possess... nothing but free will can produce our greatest happiness” (René Descartes, quoted by Clare Carlisle, 2021:81-82). Here, Descartes followed Roman Catholic theology from Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), from his *Summa Theologica* (1272), both seeing free-will as equipping humanity to make moral choices (Rubenstein 2003:221).²⁷⁾ Descartes’ formula, “I think, therefore I am,” also conveys a deeply subjective element of consciousness: People know the world only through the ego. That is to say, humanity only can begin from itself. It also implies a strict dualism: Mind is higher than Body (Collinson, 1987:57).²⁸⁾

Spinoza differed sharply with this and claimed humanity could see beyond the ego, even from a divine point of view (Nadler, 2020:108-109). Since human society indeed is ego-bound, critics could not understand Spinoza’s position on an elevated consciousness through what he called “intuition,” nor could they understand his minimization of free-will. Spinoza, who believed that people are aware of the decisions they make but are unconscious of the forces that shaped their decisions, was a determinist, for it was part of his complete and remarkably coherent worldview, one of absolute unity:

There is no mind absolute or free will, but the mind is determined for willing this or that by a cause which is determined in its turn by another cause, and this one again by another, and so on to infinity (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:272, Part II, Prop. XLVIII).

Descartes believed that the human mind placed humanity above nature and the animals. Essentially a dualist, here again he followed Roman Catholicism: Humanity is made up of two separate entities (at least), the earthly and the heavenly, the flesh and the spirit, the body and soul.²⁹⁾ This is Platonic, which Augustine of Hippo, in his *City of God* (c. 470 CE), Christianized. It made its first appearance, though, in Paul of Tarsus (c. 5-65 CE), arguably the founder of Christianity, who wrote, “For the flesh lusts against the spirit; and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary one to another: so that you do not the things that you would” (Galatians 5:17) (Douay-Rheims Bible).³⁰⁾

Spinoza, however, turned away from this and placed humanity firmly back into nature where he felt it belonged. Humanity is part of nature’s cause and effect continuum — and so our actions are built on antecedent experiences (Nadler, 2018:209). He in fact foreshadowed the modern environmental movement that stresses Mother Nature’s importance, from indigenous spiritual traditions. When we harm nature, we harm ourselves. “Determinism” was his metaphor for human experience — humanity was both one with nature and with the divine, which for him were one and the same, and so people functioned in concert with these forces. In fact, the laws of nature for him were the decrees of God (Baruch Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, 1677:19). He called this Natured Nature (*Natura Naturata*):

By *Natura Naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things that are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:270).

Determinism, which many of the world’s religions hold, confounds the Western mind even today, for it

removes, or at least minimizes, moral responsibility.³¹⁾ In Buddhism, past “karma” determines one’s experience in the ways life acts on the individual, whether positively or negatively. Spinoza’s cause and effect, too, reflects something of this. Spinoza believed “good” and “evil” were social constructs that had no basis in objective reality: “Good and evil do not exist in nature” (Baruch Spinoza, quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:222). Both Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) (1135-1204), the great Jewish sage and author of *Mishneh Torah* (1180), and Spinoza shared a rational approach to religion and saw the categories of “good” and “evil” as subjective and relative — tied to a culture, a time, a language, and dependent on social-consensus (Goldstein, 2006:81). “True and false,” on the other hand, are absolute (Kraemer, 2008:378-379). The question of how much free-will people in fact have has haunted the imagination since ancient times:³²⁾

The free-will problem is an ancient conundrum; it was invented by the Stoics and it has troubled the human imagination and the human mind ever since... the fact that we are likely to choose in the way in which we do, are determined — in other words, when there are alternatives, though it is of course possible to do either one or the other, the fact that we are placed in a situation where these are the alternatives, and more than that, that our will is going to be determined in a certain direction, means that we do what we will, but our will itself is not free (Berlin, 1999:73).

The Abrahamic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — are at their foundations deterministic systems (Calvinism is the extreme example, with the divine determining before the foundation of the world who would be saved and who would be damned; here free-will in salvation simply does not exist).³³⁾ Everything important has already happened: the Mosaic Covenant, the Resurrection of Jesus, and the Revelation to Muhammad. Now, caught between the times, somewhere after these events and before the Final Judgement, as the cosmos grinds inexorably to its apocalyptic consummation, how much free-will does one have? Certainly, it is not in anyone’s power to forestall ultimate destiny from the perspective of any of these religious traditions, though Milton’s Satan and Herman Melville’s (1819-1891) Captain Ahab tried. Yet, people still have moral choice, choices that reverberate in the direction a person’s life takes; at least this is the belief, otherwise criminal justice systems would be meaningless. If one chooses correctly, he or she finds happiness; if one chooses wrongly, a life of misery.

Unfortunately, in a world based on dualisms, where one either believes in free-will *or* in determinism, Spinoza was “both-and.” Yes, the world is moving inexorably toward its end, whatever this may be, based on cause and effect, but people still have moral choice, though this choice may not be as extensive as they themselves perceive it to be. Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BCE) wrote, “character is destiny” (Dodds, 1951:42); the question is in the degree that character determines destiny:

The mere fact that it is my character that determines my choices and actions does not, if my character itself and its effects are due to ineluctable causes, render me free in the sense that appears to be required by the notions of responsibility or of moral praise and blame... would lead us to look honestly on justice as we now do or beauty or kindness or strength or genius: we praise or congratulate the possessors of the latter qualities with no implication that they could have chosen to own a

different set of characteristics (Berlin, 1997:102).

4. Treatise on theology and politics

Spinoza's *Treatise on Theology and Politics* (1670) is a call to action. While *Ethics*, which I will consider below, focuses on personal liberation, here the focus is on social redemption: Freedom from religious intolerance, political oppression, tyranny, and war. People, he declared, can use the political system to shape an environment where greater serenity is possible: No guides or mediators are necessary, collective action alone can surely accomplish this. Here, again, Spinoza prefigures Emerson: "Insist on yourself... Imitation is suicide." Spinoza outlined his motivation for writing this compelling work, which some claim "evolves into one of the most impassioned defenses of a free democratic state in the history of political theory, an eloquent plea for the separation of church and state" (Goldstein, 2006:6):

1. The prejudices of the theologians, for I know that they are the greatest obstacles to men's being able to apply their minds to philosophy; so, I am busy exposing them and removing them from the minds of the more prudent;
2. The opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can;
3. The freedom of philosophizing and saying what we think, which I want to defend in every way; here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness (Baruch Spinoza as quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:289).

Published anonymously (even the publisher's name was changed to a fictitious one), Spinoza wrote the *Treatise* in a free-style Latin and it is less formal than *Ethics*; here his personal voice overwhelmingly breaks through — his particular concern was to free philosophy from theology (theologians should not be society's watchdogs for heresy) (Baruch Spinoza, 1670:526). Some of it may also reflect his thoughts just after the excommunication (Goldstein, 2006:192-193). It is his most definitive view of democratic institutions up until that point and it has been spectacularly influential, especially in its influence of John Locke. He also puts forward an incredibly courageous analysis of the Hebrew Bible (this covers about three-fourths of the book). His criticism of Moses' authorship most rankled the faithful.

Since time immemorial, and without the texts stating so, the devout have believed that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible (the Jewish Torah — Hebrew for "Teaching" or Christian Pentateuch — Greek for "Five Books" are the same, word for word). Moses, the inspired prophet, who spoke with the divine face to face, only he was qualified to convey the revelation from on high. This belief of Moses' authorship became a deeply-rooted tradition in all three monotheistic faiths. Thomas Hobbes was among the first to offer a mild critique of this to a wider audience, in *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes' books were banned in England, and some members of Parliament claimed the Great Fire of London (1665-66) was God's punishment on England for tolerating Hobbes' views. Spinoza's no-holds-barred critique, however, was the most comprehensive (and accurate) until that point. He also offered a sweepingly original analysis, known today as Higher Criticism, which many agree he largely invented. Also called

Historical Criticism, he examined the “background” of the authors, or at least as much as could be known, their culture and experience, with their underlying purposes for writing as they did:³⁴⁾

This history [or the Bible] must describe fully, with respect to all the books of the Prophets, the circumstances of which a record has been preserved, viz. the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom, and finally, in what language. Next, it must relate the fate of each book: how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, and how many different readings of it there were, by whose deliberation it was accepted among the sacred books, and finally, how all the books which everyone now acknowledges to be sacred came to be unified into one corpus. The history of Scripture, I say, must contain all these things. For to know which sentences are put forward as laws and which moral teachings, it is important to know the life, character and concerns of the author. Moreover, the better we know someone’s spirit and mentality, the more easily we can explain his words (Baruch Spinoza, *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, 1600:459-460).

Spinoza was a Bible maven, fluent in Hebrew, having mastered the Scriptures so thoroughly he might have been able to recite it, or much of it, word for word, but to be on safer ground, he built on the work of others, especially on Thomas Hobbes and Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089-1167), a Spanish rabbi whose books were also burned. Spinoza picks apart the inconsistencies as no one else would have dared, while quoting copiously from ibn Ezra’s commentaries. I will only mention a few points to illustrate his approach: Deuteronomy 34:10 (New International Version) “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face...” This must have been written by someone much later, Spinoza asserted, who could compare Moses with other prophets before offering this declaration. “These *are* the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on this side of the Jordan in the wilderness,” (Deuteronomy 1:1) (New King James Version), could only have been written by someone in Israel, describing the things that happened “on this side of the Jordan” (Moses, by tradition, never entered the Promised Land). Sections report information that Moses could not have known: the list of kings named in Genesis 36 lived long after Moses, for example. Not only is Moses spoken of in the third person — something eyewitnesses ancient or modern tend not to do — but Moses’ death, and burial by Yahweh, is also described (Spinoza, 1670:474).

Further, stories in the Torah are repeated, sometimes up to three times (scholars call these “doublets” and “triplets”): The stories of Noah’s flood and Abraham’s saga, for example, are in doublets (two separate stories of these events cut up and spliced together); though the narratives are similar, each varies slightly, in some places more extensively. When these are separated, through critical analysis of the language, they become complete stories in themselves. The language and idiomatic expressions also differ a great deal, as if written in vastly different times. Some writers use “Yahweh” (YHWH) for the divine, others “Elohim” (Divine Beings).

Spinoza did believe that Moses wrote sections of the Torah: the short section known as the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Numbers 21:13-15) and the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 24). Yet, archeologists today say that the earliest examples of the Hebrew language found so far are only from the early tenth-

century BCE, with some placing Hebrew's origins around the year 1200 BCE (use of a Phoenician alphabet may have come one-hundred years later).³⁵⁾ Rabbinical Judaism places Moses (c. 1391-1271 BCE) late in the fourteenth-century BCE. Of course, the earliest biblical writer, whom scholars identify as "J," may have been working with legends and oral traditions passed down from the time of Moses. Spinoza also believed, correctly as it turns out, that Ezra the Scribe (fl. 480-440 BCE) compiled the various writings passed down for centuries and centuries into a single narrative. This is affirmed by biblical scholars today, who identify Ezra as "R" for Redactor (Spinoza, 1670:480-490). Spinoza concluded:

If you just attend to this — that all the precepts and stories in these five books are related indiscriminately, without order, with no account taken of the times, that one and the same story is often repeated, sometimes in a different way — you will easily see that all these things have been collected and piled up indiscriminately, so that afterward they might be more easily examined and reduced to order. This is true not only of the narratives in the Pentateuch, but also of the other narratives in the remaining seven books, down to the destruction of the city. They were collected in the same way (Baruch Spinoza, *Treatise on Theology and Politics*, 1670:482).

Both Protestants and Roman Catholics not only banned the book but also issued thirty-seven edicts (condemnations) against Spinoza for it (Friedman, 1987:21).

Scholars rightly puzzle over Spinoza's views of political life. If one is a determinist, how can there be any real choice in a democratic society? Political choice for him, however, was fundamental — this also, in its own way, is deterministic, since it is part of nature's flow in which everyone contributes. Spinoza expounds at length on the "Social Contract" in which people "had to make a firm decision, and reach agreement, to decide everything by the sole dictate of reason" (Spinoza, 1670:16, 198). He himself brings together determinism and a government based on democratic choice.³⁶⁾

By the right and order of nature I merely mean the rules determining the nature of each individual thing by which we conceive it is determined naturally to exist and to behave in a certain way... For it is certain that nature, considered wholly in itself, has a sovereign right to do everything that it can do, i.e., the right of nature extends as far as its power extends... since the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individual things together, it follows that each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything that it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends. (Spinoza, 1670:16, 195).

In Spinoza's time, few examples of a democratic society existed — these were mostly on paper, though some movement toward democratic change was taking place in Great Britain, Holland's United-Provinces, and in such city-republics as Genoa and Venice.³⁷⁾ In fact, Spinoza was first to identify "democracy" as the best form of government, calling it "the most natural form of state" (Nadler, 2018:400) — this later earned him the honored title of "Radical Enlightenment Thinker." He also bequeathed to later thinkers an unsurpassed view of tolerance by upending ecclesiastical authority, which arrogated the

right of thought-control and to condemn any deviations. This made people feel powerless (he also felt the doctrine of original sin was abhorrent, articulated to keep people docile and apolitical, Israel, 2010:23):

The old belief was that whatever was true was necessarily true, that things could not be otherwise than as they were, and that is why, said Spinoza (and people who thought like him), when I understand that things are inevitable, I accept them much more willingly... (Berlin, 1999:33).

Spinoza's great contribution was to bring together — reaching all the way back to the Greek philosophers — concepts of libertarianism, theories of materialism, and democratic governments based on the will of the people into the most coherent and incisive of worldviews. His work is stunning on many levels and it was the catalyst for the intense intellectual debate in all fields that ensued in subsequent centuries (Israel, 2010:239):

In the longer perspective, Spinoza's role as a key progenitor of the Radical Enlightenment was unparalleled. He was the only seventeenth-century philosopher to remain a prominent and constant presence in the philosophical debates of later eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries.... Spinoza, by contrast, remained at the forefront and was regarded throughout the later Enlightenment early by many intellectuals — and later by nineteenth-century freethinkers and creative minds, ranging from Heine to George Elliot — as the philosopher who, more than any other, forged the basic metaphysical ground-plan, exclusively secular moral values, and culture of individual liberty, democratic politics, and freedom of thought and the press that embody today the defining core values of modern secular egalitarianism: that is to say, of Radical Enlightenment (Israel, 2010:240-241).

Spinoza wrote *Treatise on Theology and Politics* anonymously, as I have mentioned, but people soon found out who the author was. It made him famous, or rather infamous. He not only believed it would inspire the educated European public to revise its opinion of biblical criticism, but also of him (Nadler, 2018:342-354). In fact, it did the opposite — it further confirmed him as a godless, amoral radical (even Thomas Hobbes, in reading the work, marveled at Spinoza's audacity, *Ibid.*, 343). A culture where biblical literalism is an absolute is not open to having its sacred Scriptures demythologized, no matter how brilliantly this is done. The reaction was mainly against his commentaries of the Bible. The latter part, on the freedom of speech in political life, was probably too idealistic to illicit much outrage, though it certainly threatened anyone with political power. The outrage (and subsequent banning of it) was pervasive, unfortunately. In fact, no one stood up publicly for Spinoza, though many leading figures agreed with him.³⁸⁾

5. The divine for Spinoza

In a dualistic world, one can only be "either-or," but Spinoza defied this with his focus on unity — he was, as I have written above, "both-and." Called both an atheist and a pantheist, Spinoza, alas, was in a

realm that the English language — or philosophy in any language — lacks a word for. But Judaism certainly has one: Spinoza was “kabbalistic.” Kabbalistic studies in part originated on the Iberian Peninsula, his ancestral culture. Two rabbis of Spinoza’s synagogue were kabbalists: Isaac Aboad (1605-1693) and Manasseh ben Israel (1604-1657). In *Treatise on Politics* (1677), Spinoza wrote, rather humorously, of his bafflement by the study of Kabbalah — its emphasis of the many meanings for each word (Goldstein, 2006:89-90).³⁹⁾

Spinoza’s application of Kabbalah is marked by his attitude and orientations in his philosophy — the important lesson he gleaned was there were myriads of ways to consider the nature of reality, of how the flow of time spiraled out from timeless eternity. Kabbalah, widely misunderstood today as an obscure, rather superstitious, mystical system that has little relevance in modern life, except among New Age gurus and their followers, is a worldview built on Judaism’s traditional practices, but it is also so much more. Created originally in the Middle Ages to foster joy and hope among a persecuted people, kabbalistic writers wanted to affirm that Judaism, and the Jewish people, had value. It began, in fact, as the “people’s poetry” in spite of its ostensible warning that it was only for a spiritually mature elite. Oddly, the divine in Kabbalah, as for Spinoza, is neither personal nor all-powerful.

More importantly, Kabbalah is a system of analysis (Bloom 1987:1-19), similar in unexpected ways to the perspectives of both Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) — the outlandishness of this juxtaposition showing its scope — who combined the literary, mystical, and rational. Kafka, in particular, had a kabbalistic orientation in his concept of the “indestructible” in the human spirit (Bloom 1994:459-460), “There is only a spiritual world; what we call the physical world is the evil in the spiritual one” (Franz Kafka, quoted by Harold Bloom, 2002:205).⁴⁰⁾ Freud’s *Interpretations of Dreams* (1900), arguably the great intellectual achievement of the twentieth-century, affirms Kabbalah’s goal of insight, in this case “dreams,” for the liberation of the spirit.⁴¹⁾

Kabbalah is as dynamic as the Cartesian, the Hegelian, the Darwinian, the Marxian, and the Freudian systems have been to shape elemental perceptions.⁴²⁾ Essentially, it is a prism through which to look at the world and one’s role in it. Religions had tidily placed the divine in the far away heavens and had separated the sacred from the profane (everyday life). Both Kabbalah and Spinoza trumpeted that all of life, in fact every moment, is sacred. It also accomplished what Spinoza would seek to continue — to bring the divine and humanity closer together. One has trouble grasping the essentials of Spinoza’s philosophy outside the radical system of Kabbalah.

Kabbalah, as Spinoza, was heretical to normative Judaism of its day and remains so even today, the reason synagogues study only the “most appropriate” aspects of it (Goldstein, 2006:40). Its intentions were to chip off from Scripture the layers of thick ritualized varnish that had accumulated over the centuries—to reopen repetitive traditions to fresh meaning. Kabbalah, in fact, means “tradition” or “that which is received,” disguising its underlying goal of “bringing new wine into old wineskins” (Finkelstein, 1992:61). As Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), the great scholar of Kabbalah, has written, “... mystical religion seeks to transform... God... from an object of dogmatic knowledge into a novel and living experience and intuition” (Scholem, 1941:10). This has been a difficult ballet, to be sure. With extraordinary balance and tact, Kabbalah both affirmed and subverted traditions — as both a creative and a destructive force. “How” it could sustain this is one of the mysteries of religious history. In fact, all movements

toward positive renewal have something of this antinomian element — destructive from its fresh and dynamic affirmations. Albert Einstein (1879-1955), an admirer of Spinoza and deep reader of his work, was in harmony with his sentiments on the divine:

The religious feeling engendered by experiencing the logical comprehensibility of profound interrelations is of a somewhat different sort from the feeling that one usually calls religious. It is more a feeling of awe at the scheme that is manifested in the material universe. It does not lead us to take the step of fashioning a god-like being in our own image — a personage who makes demands of us and who takes an interest in us as individuals. There is in this neither a will nor a goal, nor a must, but only sheer being (Albert Einstein, quoted by Rebecca Goldstein, 2006:63).

Spinoza's study of Kabbalah came just before the false Messiah, Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), a contemporary of Spinoza's in the Ottoman Empire, had applied kabbalistic formulas when he converted to Islam in 1666, claiming he was destroying evil from within.⁴³⁾ After this humiliation, since he created such a messianic frenzy everywhere, the Jewish world turned away from Kabbalah as dangerous and relegated it to the basements of synagogues where it was rarely, if ever, read. If not for a young scholar, Gershom Scholem, who collected a great deal of it in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania before the Second World War when it almost certainly would have been obliterated, the world would know very little about it (Silberman, 1998:223-224).

To understand something of Spinoza's take on this, one must turn to Isaac Luria (1534-1572) who portrays the divine as emptying out in the act of creation — in fact, an emptying *into* creation. The concept is startling and it is an entrance into Spinoza's vision, with the divine disappearing into creation, as the *Zohar* (c. 1286) implies:

With the appearance of the light, the universe expanded.

With its concealment, all individual existence came into being.

This is the mystery of the act of creation.

He who understands will understand.

(Richard Elliott Friedman, 1995:229, quoting from Daniel C. Matt's translation of the *Zohar*).

Kabbalah is universal, all souls — not merely Jewish ones — have their origins from the same emanations of the Sefirot (Carroll, 2001:396).⁴⁴⁾ Luria's Kabbalah, astonishingly original, is against the grain on multiple levels. "Exile" is one of his originalities. This is not simply a burden Jews have carried but a universal reality, beginning with the divine himself.⁴⁵⁾ Bordering on the heretical, especially in his articulation of the less than all-powerful creator, Luria claimed the divine needed to create in order to heal himself (Bloom, 1987:16):⁴⁶⁾

Existence does not begin with a perfect Creator bringing into being an imperfect universe; rather, the existence of the universe is the result of an inherent flaw or crisis within the infinite Godhead, and the purpose of creation is to correct it (Dan, 2007:75).

Yet, as Lurianic Kabbalah spread early in the seventeenth-century, Jewish authorities everywhere accepted it, in spite of its aberrant declarations, because it elevated traditional practices as supremely important. Hans Jonas (1903-1993), who authored the classic study *The Gnostic Religion* (1958), described Syrian-Egyptian Gnosticism, one of four gnostic expressions, in ways that are remarkably similar to Lurianic Kabbalah (Jonas, 1958:112-146). Most scholars believe, however, that Luria developed his ideas independently of gnostic influences (Scholem, 1941:175-177; 260).

The idea of Exile, first of the divine from himself in the first phases of creation, the *Tzimtzum* (Contraction) and the *Shivera* (Breaking), has deep gnostic leanings: Creation spirals out of control after the divine created an empty space, inadvertently spawning opposing forces bent on thwarting creation in all its manifestations (Evil as an independent metaphysical reality is another of Luria's originalities, present also in Protestant Christianity). The cosmic emptiness that remained is the empirical world as we know it. Luria differs with Gnosticism, though, in that the divine continued to engage with creation, though bound by forces not always within his control — since the divine was also subjected to time and space — especially in creation's last phase when he gave humanity the immense responsibility both for the redemption of the universe (*Tikkun Olam* or "Mending of the World") and of his own personhood:

The focus of the Kabbalistic theurgy is God, not man; the latter is given unimaginable powers, to be used in order to repair the Divine glory or the Divine image; only his initiative can improve divinity... The theurgical Kabbalah articulates a basic feature of Jewish religion in general: ...the Jew is responsible for everything, including God, since his activity is crucial for the welfare of the cosmos in general (Moshe Idel, quoted by Bloom, 1992:105).

Lurianic Kabbalah inspired people with its enormous possibilities, as Karen Armstrong has pointed out, "Yet Luria's conception of God was able to help Jews to cultivate a spirit of joy and kindness, together with a positive view of humanity at a time when the guilt and anger of the Jews could have caused many to despair and to lose faith in life altogether" (Armstrong, 1993:271). (This joy was against the backdrop, I might add, of Protestantism's extreme austerity, burdened as people were by original sin and the inherent uncertainty of whether they were among the elect, with Roman Catholicism's cult of the cross and the Inquisition's murderous intent to root out all heresy — neither at the time could be characterized as joyful.) The ideas are humanistic: People have the complete and absolute responsibility for universal salvation. Not only did it give the reasons for the ancient practices, it gave everyone a vital role in the cosmic drama. Luria anticipated Nietzsche, "He who has a 'why' to live can bear almost any 'how.'" The early kabbalistic teachings gave the Jewish world a reason to live.

Spinoza, needless to say, turned away from the divine purposes of Luria, but only to a point: Redemption and universal salvation were very much a part of his philosophy, as he attempted to answer two mysteries of kabbalistic speculation: Why does the world exist and why do people suffer? Spinoza's philosophy was Cartesian, not mystical, to be sure, but he applies Cartesian methods to answer kabbalistic questions: "[T]he beginning of all things, the *Ein Sof's* (Without End) relationship to creation and to our knowledge, the mysteries of evil and suffering" (Goldstein, 2006:89-92). Considered naïve today, especially in this Post-Holocaust Age, after the holocaust peeled the curtain back on humanity's abomi-

nable destructiveness, Spinoza applied Kabbalah and Jewish history to articulate a universal vision. This remains supremely compelling. Perhaps only socialist and messianic visions approach it in its full scope. Again, wildly optimistic though it is, it is also straight out of Hebrew Bible that describes the Messianic Age with stunning metaphors:

*And the wolf will dwell with the lamb.
And the leopard will lie down with the young goat.
And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
and a little boy will lead them*
(Isaiah 11:6).

6. Ethics: a redeemed humanity

Ethics (1677), Spinoza's *magnum opus*, is an extraordinary, multi-dimensional work, one that remains remarkably profound and accessible, penned by one of the great minds of Western Civilization as he grappled with fundamental questions of existence. In its preface he states, "I shall, therefore, treat of the nature and strength of the emotions according to the same method, as I employed heretofore in my investigations concerning God and the mind, I shall consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner as though I were compared with lines, planes, and solids" (Spinoza, 1677:69). Spinoza's philosophy is distinctive when compared with the two other great thinkers of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment that he is sandwiched between (in historical time), Descartes and Wilhelm Leibniz (c. 1646-1716). They were Christians, Roman Catholic and Protestant respectively, very much in the mainstream of their dominant cultures, howbeit on the radical side according to the standards of the time, addressing challenges within this framework. This was not Spinoza's experience, as we have seen, for he began by addressing challenges of Jewish identity, history, and suffering (Goldstein, 2006:175-176), but this was only his starting point for tackling the universal challenges inherent among the human family.

Ethics is presented in the cadences of a Hebrew prophet, in axioms rather than in poetry, where he fulfills his goal of applying Euclid's geometry to the fields of philosophy and ethics — essentially, it is sensible advice for those who want to live a higher life. He may have applied a geometrical format — with propositions followed by evidence — to hoodwink censors into believing that the work was wisdom literature based on geometric formulas. If this is so, it did not work, for the book was quickly banned shortly after it was published. The reader may find the format a hurdle, but those who persist will find it a remarkably cohesive work that is both thought-provoking and uplifting. The Enlightenment's goal, as discussed above, was not only for a more rational and less superstitious world, but also for humanity's moral progress (Graeber & Wengrow 2022:494). None spent as much time on the later as Spinoza.

Today, university philosophy departments focus on "analytic philosophy" — of what can be proven — and do not accept that the mind, and hence "reason," is equipped to discover truth on its own; this they call "metaphysics," for it is outside of empirical observation. Further, Spinoza's focus on "deductive" reasoning, beginning with specific details generalized to conclusions, largely from Euclid and Descartes, seems rather quaint today. The sciences have gone full-throttle in a different direction, toward what can

be quantified. Surprisingly, deductive reasoning (also called “top-down reasoning”) is used by physicists who study Quantum Mechanics, especially String Theory (Ibid., 2006:10-11), so Spinoza’s methods of analysis continue to contribute to a greater understanding of the world. *Ethics* leaves the reader with a sense of the small cluster of original ideas that eventually became a tsunami engulfing Western Civilization: Namely, that humanity has all it needs to resolve its own challenges, even metaphysical ones. Spinoza, in dealing with these grandiose themes, offers encouragement in an age when solutions to such challenges as environmental degradation will require universal cooperation (humanity, according to him, has the capacity for this).

How much can humanity apprehend, though, when it is in the middle of a cosmic eruption called God? What religion has only attempted to do, and what science may be able to accomplish, is to provide some reference points in all of this. For Spinoza, God was reason, so humanity is in the middle of a vast symphony of interlocking reasoning, each carrying out its own unique purposes — and humanity plays its own tune in all of this. These “facts” can be explained and elaborated on, as he has shown. The most pertinent part of *Ethics* is Spinoza’s concern for the emotional life of humanity — something that philosophy in general has avoided — for without emotional stability, humanity cannot grasp life’s important issues. Here is a theoretical system that concentrates on human psychology, in which repeating “phrases,” again as the kabbalists do, is for elevation and healing (Carlisle, 2021:37): “Cheerfulness cannot be excessive; it is always good. On the other hand, melancholy is always bad” (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:343, Part IV, Prop. XLII).

Spinoza, I should also point out, has designs on the reader, though not for any kind of religious conversion (it is by no means a sales-pitch), but in his radical remedy for the catch-22 of the human condition. His point is for readers to become outsiders to themselves — after all the word “ecstasy” means in Greek “to stand outside.” His intention is to impart “ethics” into one’s inner psychic landscape — or to awaken people to what was already in the heart, much in the way Scripture or poetry does. “Reason,” based on empirical evidence, is salvation, for it can effectively defuse emotional turbulence (Goldstein, 2006:186). Moreover, he does not hesitate to offer “immortality,” surprising as this may seem, though not in the sense of a personal immortality, with a coherent ego surviving after death (Nadler, 2020:178), but immortality through one’s association with a new kind of humanity, one rationally based: “The human mind cannot absolutely be destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal.. we feel and know by experience we are eternal” (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:209). This was from his own conversion to freedom, so he wants to point everyone toward this possibility, “...the more objects the mind understands by the second and third kinds of knowledge (reason and intuition), the less it suffers from those emotions that are evil and the less it fears death” (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:379, Part V, Prop. XXXVIII). Invariably, Spinoza connects love with life and hatred with death (Carlisle, 2021:161-162):

A free man, that is, he who lives solely according to the dictates of reason, is not guided by fear of death, but directly desires the good; that is, to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage. So, he thinks of death least of all things and his wisdom is a meditation upon life (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:355, Part IV, Prop. 67).

How is Spinoza's personal transformation possible? To return to Kabbalah, the divine emptied himself out for the sake of creation, this was traumatic but also liberating, for the divine in seeking healing for himself could not create without an empty space. People, too, can liberate themselves by purging entanglements — the ten-thousand chains imprisoning them to fear, disappointment, loathing, and other negative emotions. This is also kabbalistic — its meditations are for healing the spirit so a person can be open to its insights. All rational people are similar in this regard — individuality matters less in a community of rational beings, for all uphold the same principles of what a rational person is required to do — bequeathing an identity based not on the course outer shell of the ego, with its endless manipulations, but on an inwardly liberated person (Goldstein, 2006:67-70).

Reason, then, is an experiential salvation. One of its greatest freedoms is the freedom *from* possessions, whether objects, titles, or other people. Romantic love, of course, is the great possessive force in human life. Spinoza's message that these can only bring unhappiness do not go down well today, with the goddesses of success, accumulation, and romantic love the dominating psychic forces. True love, on the other hand, an inward appreciation, has nothing to do with erotic idealization whose aim is ownership:

These propositions, and all that relate to the true way of life and religions, are easily proved... Namely, that hatred should be overcome with love, and that every man should desire for others the good that he seeks for himself; so that whatsoever he deems to be hurtful and evil, and whatsoever, accordingly, seems to him impious, horrible, unjust, and base assumes that appearance owing to his own disordered, fragmentary, and confused view of the universe. Wherefore, he strives before all things to conceive things as they really are, and to remove the hindrances to true knowledge, such as are hatred, anger, envy, derision, pride, and similar emotions... Thus he endeavors, as we said before, as far as in him lies to do good, and to go on his way rejoicing (Baruch Spinoza, as quoted by Rebecca Goldstein, 2006:239-40).

Can people, then, take the leap of faith to a new identity that sheds the ego-driven identity? Spinoza hoped this was possible, for it would create a better world. The resetting of one's subjectivity with the divine, or with objective reality, is the starting point. One sacrifices identity, then, for essence. Jesus, in the original sayings (called *Quelle* "Source" in German) (Saying 19), said, "Whoever tries to protect his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life on account of me (for Spinoza the Reality Principle) will preserve it."⁴⁷⁾ This is in harmony with traditional faiths everywhere: the loss of ego is in fact redemptive.⁴⁸⁾

Spinoza articulated a process for "how" humanity can elevate itself above cause and effect, marking the thrust of his philosophy as utopian, in three levels of consciousness: 1) Random Thoughts or Superficial Opinions; 2) Reason; and 3) Intuition. All conflict, war, even personal misery derives from the lower state of consciousness, among the random thoughts — the repetitions of anger, hatred, jealousy, revenge, failure to act, weakness of character and will, with failure to grasp of the laws of nature (Carlisle, 2021:122). Reason, Spinoza's second prescription, is fine-tuning oneself toward objective reality, a stepping stone to a higher reality, one empirical in nature. It is a level of consciousness tied to facts, but

if people remain only at the second-level they fall short of something greater. Intuition, the highest, as a bolt of lightning, is “a flash of insight that fused all the information he had acquired discursively and which was an experience of what Spinoza believed to be God. He called this experience ‘beatitude’” (Armstrong, 2001:23):

In intuitive knowledge, the whole entailed system — for each implicated thing entails the whole implicative order — is made palpable, if intuitively, present. We can only approach this third level asymptotically. We can never achieve it fully, since to do so would be to possess the mind of God, the thinking with which the infinite order of necessary connections thinks itself (Goldstein, 2006:187).

As humanity progresses to higher consciousness, Spinoza believed, connected as it is to the divine, peace is possible: “He who clearly and distinctly understands himself and his affects loves God, and loves him better the better he understands himself and his affects... From the third kind of knowledge arises the greatest possible peace of mind” (Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:375-376, V, Prop. XXVII).⁴⁹⁾

Spinoza declares that salvation is right in front of everyone and marvels that more do not take the very minimal steps to experience it:

The wise person, insofar as he is considered as such, is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity, conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind. If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, still, it can be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare (Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1677:382, Part V, Prop. 42).

7. Conclusion

Some have imagined that Baruch Spinoza visited the dedication of the new synagogue (a celebration that lasted one week) in August 1672, while he was in Amsterdam. Did he stand across the street, as the crowds gathered, to watch for family members? With the excommunication now over fifteen-years in the past, he had never met his nieces and nephews. Rabbi Aboad, who with others issued the excommunication against him, was now Chief Rabbi and the flourishing community that had built this structure, then the largest synagogue in Europe, was in part his achievement: A people in Exile, arriving as poverty-stricken refugees some fifty or so years earlier, most having lost everything, had created a home for themselves. This was also the Jewish story, repeated by then for over two thousand years, beginning with the Assyrian invasion of 720 BCE: A new life in a foreign land but one destined to be uprooted eventually, again and again and again. The Nazis in 1940 were only the most recent attempt to eliminate a Jewish community which believed it was secure. The Nazis nearly succeeded, killing over one-hundred-thousand Dutch Jews, including Anne Frank, her mother and her sister. This hardscrabble community had helped shape this great philosopher, himself as tough as leather, whose insights would

inspire countless millions in the generations ahead. There it was in front of him: A building showing permanence in the temporal. Spinoza knew he had to turn away. He had already made this choice long ago, to lunge for the absolutes and universals on his own terms.

Notes

- 1) Hinrich Oldenburg (1618-1677), Secretary of the Royal Society of London, befriended Spinoza and connected him with leading thinkers and scientists of Europe.
- 2) The *Treatise on Politics*, Spinoza's most mature work, was uncompleted at his death, and it shows that his vision of human nature had darkened. He had studied the constitutions of city-republics of Genoa and Venice, cities that were at the forefront of democratic change — the *Treatise* is dynamic for its practical blueprint. When reading it one realizes that he left behind a great deal of the idealism found in his *Treatise on Theology and Politics* and *Ethics*. One can only imagine the work he would have produced had he lived.
- 3) John Locke (1632-1704) remains a foundational figure of how self-government works: a constitution agreed upon by the people. Before Locke, people saw nations as the personal possessions of kings, queens, and the aristocracy. After Locke, the people collectively owned their nations. Locke, while in exile in Holland for five years, befriended Spinoza's friends from whom he gleaned Spinoza's political theories. The ideas, then, are from Spinoza through Locke and then to the world.
- 4) The Enlightenment (1637-1804), in fact, originated from the discovery of ancient texts of the Moorish Golden Age — when Jewish and Muslim scholars had translated all the work of Aristotle into Arabic — other of the masterpieces of learning: *Book of Causes* (also presumed to be by Aristotle), *Almagest* by Ptolemy, and *Elements of Geometry* by Euclid. In 1236, after the fall of Córdoba, which had been a center of learning under Islam since the early-seventh-century, the Spanish monarchy, then under Ferdinand III (1201-1252), came into possession of a treasure trove of these precious manuscripts. Altogether there were twenty-four medical books, many from Gallen, and over eighty other texts. All were in Arabic. Ferdinand commissioned Jewish and Muslim scholars to translate the texts into Latin. As these became available, and as scholars from all over Europe journeyed to Toledo to study them, they gave birth to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is associated with the Reformation, seen as building on its openness toward personal autonomy — in this case that one could interpret the Bible on his or her own. This openness, then, allowed Aristotle's work to be widely studied, which fostered a dynamism that we know today as the Enlightenment (Rubenstein, 2003:19).
- 5) Scholars believe the world knows the inner life of Jesus through the *Sermon on the Mount*, what scholars call Q1, the sixteen-hundred-words of the original sayings. The inner life of Shakespeare, many say, is seen by combining the *Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (c. 1601) with Sir John Falstaff of the Henry IV plays.
- 6) Spinoza became an optics specialist. The Dutch astronomer Christiann Huygens (1629-1695), who discovered the moon Titan orbiting Saturn, was one of his customers. Huygens never addressed Spinoza by his name, only calling him "The Jew of Voorburg" — Voorburg was the town where Spinoza lived at the time.
- 7) Johann Colerus, a Protestant minister who would later write a book denigrating Spinoza's anti-Christian philosophy, had also rented a room at the same boarding house, and described him as follows: "His conversation and way of life were calm and retiring. He knew how to control his passions in an admirable way. No one ever saw him sad or merry. He could control or hold in his anger and his discontent, making it known only by a sign or a single short word, or standing up and leaving out of a fear that his passion might get the better of him. He was, moreover, friendly and sociable in his daily intercourse. If the housewife or other members of the household were sick, he never failed to comfort them and to console them and to encourage them to endure that which, he told them, was the lot assignment to them by God. He exhorted the children of the house to be polite and to be respectful of their elders and to go to public worship" (Johann Colerus as quoted by Steven Nadler, 2018:336).

- 8) I should also say that Spinoza was deeply irritated when “well-meaning” Christians attempted to convert him to the Christian faith. Of course, in the culture he was in, this was bound to happen. Spinoza respected the human impulse toward the divine in whatever form it took, but he reacted negatively when people tried to force doctrines on him. He was open with everyone about his beliefs, though, and claimed he could accept neither miracles nor the Resurrection of Christ, which for him were symbolic rather than literal.
- 9) Collegiates, part of Dutch culture, were only a phenomenon of the seventeenth-century Holland. Made up of what is called “dissenting Christians,” the Dutch government, though it would not allow these dissenters to worship publicly, did allow them to have Bible studies, which usually took place every other Sunday. Spinoza gravitated toward these groups and even led the Bible studies, teaching them how to analyze scripture in the methods he learned in his Talmudic studies. Later, these group meetings focused exclusively on Spinoza’s own work. Many became his close friends: Lodewijk Meyer, Simon de Vries, Pieter Balling, Jarig Jellesz, and Jan Rieuwertsz — most were Mennonites. Jan Rieuwertsz, a publisher and bookseller, published Spinoza’s *Treatise on Politics and Religion*. Sensibly, because of the subject matter, especially his analysis of the Hebrew Bible, Spinoza insisted that a “fake” publisher be listed, to protect Rieuwertsz. Many among the group also supported Spinoza financially — though he was more likely than not to turn the money down — for they recognized his extraordinary gifts and wanted his work to become known to the world (Goldstein, 2006:230231).
- 10) A deranged member of the synagogue had also attacked Spinoza with a knife, as he was leaving the Portuguese theater in Amsterdam, some months after his excommunication. Fortunately, it was winter, and since he was wearing a thick coat, the knife could only rip the outer fabric. Spinoza kept this coat to the end of his days, perhaps to remind himself of the dangers of religious fanaticism (Goldstein, 2006:217). This may be another reason why Spinoza never returned to the synagogue.
- 11) What, some have asked, emboldened Spinoza to face down dogmatic authorities? This he would do all his life. The dissenters, historians have imagined, offered an example of remaining firm in the face of overwhelming social opposition. Unmovable, they stood firmly on principle on what they believed was true (some of among these sects accepted neither the Trinity nor the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, an anathema then as today). He had also become associated with radical Roman Catholics through his study of Latin at Franciscus van den Enden’s (1602-1674) school (he had been a Jesuit for fourteen years but was expelled for reasons that are unclear). Van den Enden held deeply utopian views, which influenced his young student’s philosophy. A French citizen, he was hanged in November 1674 for plotting against Louis XIV.
- 12) Historians are mystified by the severity of the excommunication, since at this point Spinoza, as a young man, had not published anything — heretics are usually considered dangerous only through the books they write. He could have returned to the synagogue any time, using a little diplomacy. Excommunication, though, was not so uncommon. Steven Nadler wrote (2018:148): “In all, between 1622 and 1683, as the historian Yosef Kaplan has discovered, thirty men and one woman were excommunicated by Spinoza’s congregation, for periods ranging from one day to eleven years. (The woman, the wife of Jacob Moreno, was excommunicated in 1654 together with her husband when they failed to heed the warning that they were causing a scandal in the community by allowing Daniel Castiel to enter their house when Jacob was not at home). Rarely — as in the case of Spinoza — was the ban never removed.”
- 13) Please see the Spinoza website about this obscure encounter, retrieved August 18, 2022:
<https://spinozaweb.org/people/191>
- 14) Given that his paternal grandmother had been a victim of the Inquisition, did he have misgivings in talking with someone associated with the Inquisition, or did he even know of Solano’s connection with the Inquisition? Though his grandmother had converted to Roman Catholicism, as most Jews had, she secretly practiced Judaism. She was arrested after her own father and aunt denounced her as a Jew (this shows the fear the Inquisition engendered that divided families). The Inquisition authorities forced her to wear clothing of shame: yellow robes painted with black crosses, to show her repentance for her lapses of not honoring the Christian faith.

- 15) Solano had also described Spinoza's physical appearance, then in his mid-twenties, "a small man, with a beautiful face, a pale complexion, black hair and black eyes... a well-formed body, thin. Long black hair, a small moustache of the same color, a beautiful face."
- 16) As a member of a minority looked upon with suspicion, Spinoza knew he had to be careful. *Ethics* (1677), his masterpiece, published only after his death (he declined to publish it during his lifetime), showed his fear of the "Thought Police" of his day who monitored society for heretics. Spinoza was correct in this surmise, for the Netherlands banned all his books from 1678. He had written at least four books during his lifetime, but he published only one under his own name, *Principles of Philosophy* (1663), on Descartes' mathematics. Still, even this was not a safe topic, since Descartes' books had also been banned.
- 17) The Union of Utrecht, in 1579, was the birth of the United Provinces of the Netherlands. It was to be a Protestant nation, since it was no longer part of the Hapsburg Empire, controlled by the Roman Catholic Spanish branch (Goldstein, 2006:116).
- 18) Also in Amsterdam were many Ashkenazi (Germanic/Polish) Jews who had fled from the Ukraine massacre (1648-1657). The Cossacks, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki (c. 1595-1657), after rebelling against Polish rule, attempted to establish an independent Ukraine. They killed up to three-hundred-thousand Jews and destroyed about three-hundred Jewish communities. They saw the Jews as loyal to the Polish crown. Most of those who fled to Amsterdam were utterly poverty-stricken, and they even begged on the streets. The Amsterdam city government asked the more prosperous Sephardic Jews to take the refugees in, and to help support them financially, which of course they did.
- 19) Tomás de Torquemada (1420-1498), a Dominican Cardinal, appointed by King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I in 1483 as Grand Inquisitor of Castile and León, set about killing heretics, burning some two-thousand at the stake; most were Jews. Here, in burning heretics, they believed they were following biblical injunctions from John 15:6 (New International Version): "If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."
- 20) The Sephardic community of Amsterdam thrived, even building the largest synagogue of Europe of the time, in 1672. Called in Portuguese "Esnoga," it is still in use today in Breestraat, the section of town where Rembrandt (1606-1669) lived; he painted portraits of Jews of the area for his biblical scenes. A contemporary of Spinoza, many speculate that they knew each other, or at least they had met.
- 21) There were three Sephardic synagogues in Amsterdam: Beth Jacob, Neve Shalom, and Beth Israel. The three together used the huge synagogue, under the name Beth Israel (Goldstein, 2006:157).
- 22) The Marranos (forced converts to Christianity on the Iberian Peninsula) were also an ethical and spiritual force as "outsiders" and confirmed parts of the Hebrew Bible little discussed, especially the book of Esther — Esther hid her identity to later save her people. Also called "Christianos Nuevos" (New Christians) and "crypto-Jews," in 1391 alone about two-hundred-thousand saved themselves by converting to Roman Catholicism. On March 31, 1492, the year Columbus set sail for the Americas, the monarchs Isabella I of Castile (1451-1504) and Ferdinand II of Aragon (1452-1516) announced the *Alhambra Decree* (the Edict of Expulsions) for all of Jewish descent — even many who had converted to Christianity (Mazover 2004:67) — to leave the Iberian Peninsula and all their territories by July 31st of the same year. No one knows exactly how many were expelled, but it may have been as high as seven-hundred-thousand (Silberman 1997:109-110). The exiled Marranos who settled in Amsterdam, Leghorn, and the Ottoman Empire suffered from the stigma of having betrayed their ancestral faith. Synagogues, as we see in the case of Spinoza's parents, worked out procedures to return them to the Jewish fold (Ibid., 147).
- 23) R.H. Tawney, 1926:109: "Where Lutheranism had been socially conservative, deferential to established political authorities... Calvinism was an active and radical force. It was a creed which sought, not merely to purify the individual, but to reconstruct Church and State, and to renew society by penetrating every department of life, public as well as private, with the influence of religion."

- 24) Since the days of Constantine (c. 272-337 CE), when it became the religion of the Roman Empire (325 CE), Christianity had emphasized “correct” belief, as it drove out and punished alternative views to the Nicene Creed as heretics, especially the followers of Arius (256-336 CE). The Nicene Creed (325 CE), while creating a greater solidarity for the religion of the Roman Empire, also indirectly set in motion modern day antisemitism (Rubenstein, 1999:225-226).
- 25) The Wittgenstein family suffered the same fate as all other wealthy Jewish families after Hitler’s war machine took over Austria in 1938: The Nazi Shakedown. The family, which owned a steel company, were forced to pay handsomely for avoiding transport to the concentration camps.
- 26) “Emotional distress and unhappiness have their origin especially in excessive love towards a thing subject to considerable instability a thing which we can never possess. For nobody is disturbed or anxious about anything unless he loves it, nor do wrongs, suspicions, enmities, etc. except from love towards things which nobody can truly possess” (Spinoza, *Ethics*, V, Prop. 20).
- 27) Augustine and Aquinas are as bookends in the library of Christian theology, each applying Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle respectively, to interpret Christian theology: The range of theology, then, is contained in these two. In reading Augustine’s *City of God*, one is struck with how he created a consistent theology that has remained relevant over the centuries. Even revivalist Christians today could not disagree with anything in this great work. Without Aristotle’s work coming to Europe, however, would the Enlightenment have been possible? Of course, no one can adequately answer that question, but it is possible that Europe may have remained, more or less permanently, in the Dark Ages.
- 28) Descartes, unfortunately, was not able to reconcile how the two substances, flesh and spirit, are associated with each other. How are “thought” and the “physical body” reconciled? “Even if we suppose God has joined some corporeal substance to such a thinking substance so closely that they cannot be more closely conjoined, thus compounding them into a unity, they nonetheless remain really distinct” (Descartes, quoted by Steven Nadler, 2020:19). Spinoza solved the dilemma by saying only one substance in fact existed and everything is a manifestation of this.
- 29) Did Spinoza’s idea of oneness come from the monotheism of Judaism, as Descartes’ tripartite person, Mind, Body, and Spirit, did from the Christian Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)?
- 30) Paul of Tarsus began as a reformer of Judaism in the Greek culture of his birth: the Eastern Mediterranean. He wanted the Jewish synagogues to make room for the worship of Jesus of Nazareth and have them allow non-Jewish worshippers to join without undergoing the rigors of conversion — learning Hebrew, for males to be circumcised, and requiring them to keep the Law of Moses (Paul, quite frankly, was asking for too much). Paul’s gospel was too generous, indeed, given the abuse of spiritual freedom (often sexual) he wrote against in his two letters to the Corinthians (these churches had completely misunderstood Christian Liberty). Paul counted on a personal inward transformation among converts, but this transformation never took hold. Of course, Judaism could not bend to Paul’s request. The result was nascent Christianity — groups outside Judaism made up both of non-Jews (mostly) and Jews. Their only requirement was to “believe” and “be baptized.” Both Paul and Muhammad (c. 570-632) had that extremely rare gift for universal symbolism and metaphors — in the simplicity of approaching the divine. In the contest between these competing visions, Muhammad will undoubtedly triumph. Islam is set to become the world’s largest religion by 2070.
- 31) One may rightly ask: Does the ideal of moral responsibility in Western thought, informed by the Abrahamic faiths, somehow limit humanity’s potential for a world of peace? Do religious dogmas, in other words, lodged only at the first level of consciousness, create a world where conflict is more likely?
- 32) Isaiah Berlin wrote at length of this challenge and showed Spinoza’s place in the debate — no one believes in absolute determinism, of course, this is only in degrees (Berlin, 1997:100): “It is over this issue that the immense discussion about free will that has preoccupied philosophers ever since originally arose. Chrysippus’ answer, that all that I can reasonably ask for is that my own character should be among the factors influencing

- behavior, is the central core of the classical doctrine of freedom as self-determination. Its proponents stretch in unbroken line from Chrysippus and Cicero to Aquinas, Spinoza, Locke and Leibniz, Hume, Mill, Schopenhauer, Russell, Schlick, Ayer, Nowell-Smith and the majority of the contributors to the subject in our own day.”
- 33) Predestination in salvation has its origins, in fact, in Paul of Tarsus (Romans 9:15-18): “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy. For Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.”
- 34) Higher Criticism began in earnest, however, in eighteenth-century Germany, in a more tolerant intellectual climate, when a few, following Spinoza, agreed that the Torah was a piecing together of several authors. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752-1827), a German professor, published a paper in 1780 identifying three writers of the Torah. Later, the German scholar W.M.C. De Wett (1780-1849), writing in his doctoral thesis of 1840, showed that three different authors wrote Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, but he added a fourth person who wrote Deuteronomy. By the nineteenth-century scholars began using alphabetic designations for the different writers: “J” for the person using Yahweh (all were German and the German equivalent for Y is closer to the J sound in English), “E” for the one using Elohim, “D” for the Deuteronomy author, “P” for the Priestly Leviticus author (and large parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers) of ritual concerns, and “R” for the Redactor (editor — certainly, as Spinoza suggested, this was Ezra the Scribe) who put them all together, adding some lines and chapters here and there (mostly genealogies) to smooth over the seams. Karl Henrich Graf (1815-1869) wrote of the timeline in which each of the authors wrote their work; Wilhelm Vatke (1806-1882) expounded on the development within the religion itself, its various stages from primitive to more sophisticated, and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) brilliantly brought together the work of all who preceded him in his “Document Hypothesis” (1878). This remains foundational for biblical studies today.
- 35) The Song of Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21) and the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2-31), composed in perhaps the most archaic Hebrew of the Bible, may date back close to the culture’s origins in the thirteenth-century BCE (Bloom 2019:38), first as poems passed down orally until penned in an early Hebrew script in the eleventh-century BCE.
- 36) Rather counter-intuitively, given Spinoza’s views on the Social Contract forming the basis of self-government, Spinoza followed Thomas Hobbes’ injunctions to obey authority figures (the Sovereign) without questioning him or her. Ensuring personal safety is a government’s absolute obligation and this can only happen with a docile population. Please see Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan* 1651:153-156). Also please see *Spinoza’s Complete Works* (2001:530-531).
- 37) The realization of democratic rights has been a slow and painful process. In England, as just one example, a tentative Constitutional Monarchy began in 1215 with the *Magna Carta* (the Great Charter), which challenged the absolute authority of the King, especially Number 61: “The barons shall choose any twenty-five barons of the realm they wish, who with all their might are to observe, maintain and cause to be observed the peace and liberties which we have granted and confirmed to them by this our present charter.” In other words, the King is obligated to follow the barons. If not, they could take the King’s property. King John (1166-1216), though he signed the document, got Pope Innocent III (1161-1216) to annul the *Magna Carta*. Yet the *idea* of inclusion continued. The barons elected the first Parliament in 1265 and it also represented the merchant class. The idea simmered for centuries. With the *Glorious Revolution* (1688), a modern constitutional monarchy began to take shape (this was not long after Spinoza’s death in 1677). The King’s authority was further limited: 1) the monarch could not abolish any laws or make laws without Parliament’s approval; 2) the monarch could not tax without approval of Parliament; 3) the monarch could not have an army without Parliament’s approval. After 1688, Parliament agreed to allow the press (newspapers) to publish how each voted. The “Rule of Law” became central and in theory applied universally. After England and Scotland united in 1707, Parliament began enforcing property rights and citizens began voting for representatives. Less than 2% of the population could

- vote, however. In 1832, reforms increased the number of voters from 8% to 16% of the adult male population. *The Third Reform Act of 1884* gave the vote to 60% of all adult men. *The People Act of 1918*, after the First World War, gave the vote to all men twenty-one years old and older and finally to women, who had to be thirty years old and married to a taxpayer. Finally, in 1928, the vote was extended to all women twenty-one and older (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012:310-318).
- 38) Spinoza became both a “social critic” and a “reformer” by the very questions he asked: “Why are fundamental beliefs about the religion, society, and human nature blindly accepted and affirmed?” But he also offered alternatives. Few appreciate having their dearest personal fallacies, affirmed by what they perceive as timeless traditions, questioned and dismissed, but Spinoza insisted that this had to be done to create a more humane society: The splinter must be taken out of a person’s eye to restore vision.
- 39) “[T]hey say that the various readings are the symbols of profoundest mysteries and that mighty secrets lay hid in the twenty-eight hiatus which occur, nay, even in the very form of the letters. Whether they are actuated by folly and infantile devotion, or whether by arrogance the secrets of God, I know not; this much I do know, that I find in their writings nothing which has the air of a Divine secret, but only childish lucubration. I have read and know kabbalistic triflers, whose insanity provokes my unceasing astonishment” (*A Political Tract* Chapter 9, quoted by Goldstein, 2006:90).
- 40) Gershom Scholem, the founder of Kabbalah scholarship, wrote of Kafka, “...many exciting thoughts had led me (in the years 1916-1918) to intuitive affirmation of mystical theses which walked the fine line between religion and nihilism. I later (found in Kafka) the most perfect and unsurpassed expression of this fine line, an expression which, as a secular statement of the Kabbalistic world-feeling in a modern spirit, seemed to me to wrap Kafka’s writings in the halo of the canonical” (Scholem, as quoted by David Biayle, 1987:121).
- 41) Here is among Sigmund Freud’s most famous quotes from *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): “The dream (I will call this “insight”) is the liberation of the spirit from the pressure of external nature, a detachment of the soul from the fetters of matter.”
- 42) Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) hypothesis of “natural selection,” in *On the Origins of the Species* (1859), is also a secular myth, though based on deductive reasoning where Darwin used the example of breeding animals to show how nature propels evolution. It cannot be empirically quantified, since the time lapse required, in millions of years, is too long. Yet, geneticists have isolated the gene that allows for adaptations within species that Darwin observed in the Galapagos Islands. Some finches on one island had long beaks, while those on another had blunted beaks, all for food gathering required by the terrain on the different islands — some were rocky while others were jungle. This gene equipped them to survive. Darwin wrote, “I look at the term *species* as one arbitrarily given for the sake of convenience to a set of individuals closely resembling each other... The term variety, again, in comparison with the more individual differences, is also applied arbitrarily, and for mere convenience-sake. It is not on account of final causes” (Charles Darwin, quoted by Louis Menand, 2001:123). Darwin’s theory caught on because it implied an underlying order to life — of organisms designed for a purpose — the purpose of survival. Yet, in Darwin’s theory, the universe itself has no meaning, for no one can guess what the end might be (Ibid., 2001:364).
- 43) The Sultan Mehmed IV (1642-1693), a devout Muslim, hoped for the conversion of Ottoman Jews to Islam and believed that Sabbatai Tzvi could help him (Scholem 1973:847). After Sabbatai’s arrest, the Privy Council gave him three choices: 1) to perform a miracle (by surviving the arrows of the Sultan’s archers) to prove he was the Messiah; 2) to endure a slow death by spears on a stake at the Gate of Seraglio (the place for public execution), to become a martyr for his faith; or 3) to become a Muslim. As a circumcised Jew, converting for Sabbatai would involve only a change of clothing, from Jewish to Muslim attire (Dan 1987:295). Sabbatai chose to become a Muslim. On one level, the Jewish people never recovered from this betrayal.
- 44) Isaac Luria was born in Jerusalem — his father was Ashkenazi (who had earlier immigrated from Germany) and his mother Sephardic (who may have been from Egypt) — where he lived until his father died (Luria was

eight years old). After, his mother moved the family to Cairo, where her brother was a wealthy tax-farmer. Records show that as a young man Luria worked as an investor in agricultural trade around the Mediterranean (Scholem 1978:420-421), but he retreated from everyday life at about aged twenty-one, after marrying his uncle's daughter, to study the *Zohar* in a cottage near the Nile River. There, he spent between six and seven years in intense meditation, visiting his family only on the Sabbath and speaking only in Hebrew during his visits (Ibid., 1978:421). Later he became associated with rabbinic councils in Cairo (Fine 2003:38). Luria moved to Safed, Israel in 1579 to study under one of the great scholars of the time, Moses Cordovero (1522-1570), himself a child of Sephardic refugees from the Iberian Peninsula. Luria became a leader of a kabbalistic community after Cordovero's passing.

- 45) Please see Harold Bloom *Omens of Millennium*, (1996:212): "Everything in Luria's thought moves in great triple rhythm. God contracts or withdraws himself; this absence brings about the cosmological catastrophe that Luria called the 'breaking of the vessels'; human prayer, study, and ecstatic contemplation bring about a mending that yet may restore a shattered world."
- 46) Please see Neil Asher Silberman (1998) *Heavenly Powers*, p. 172: "How did Luria's mystical insights so profoundly alter the nature of all subsequent kabbalistic technique and philosophy? It had to do with a stunning new — even heretical — understanding of the nature of evil as a deep-seated element of history and reality.... Some kabbalistic tradition had understood evil as the result of a flawed, primitive emanation. Others had described it as a manifestation of divine judgment destructively ripped loose from its balanced connection with divine mercy. But Luria rejected these ideas of evil, suffering, and misfortune as merely externals to the essence of God.... And while earlier Kabbalists had envisioned the act of creation as one of conscious, creative emanation, Luria suddenly recognized creation as a process of purification — primarily aimed at destroying the principle of evil from within."
- 47) Please see Burton Mack (1993) *The Lost Gospel of Q: The Book of Christian Origins*, pp. 73-80.
- 48) Kabbalists, I should also point out, are Spinoza's ideal, since they immersed their individuality into the community and if anyone published, he never used his own name, since this was unworthy of a kabbalistic devotee.
- 49) Here, Spinoza seems to prophesy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote to ordinary people of the same kind of oceanic consciousness that Spinoza develops: "I am to invite men drenched in Time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immortal air.... In the highest moments, we are a vision. There is nothing that can be called gratitude nor properly joy. The soul is raised over passion. It seeth nothing so much as Identity, a Perceiving that Truth and Right ARE. Hence it becomes a perfect Peace out of the knowing that all things will go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea; vast intervals of time, years, centuries, are annihilated to it; this which I think and feel underlay *that former state of life* and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and will always all circumstance, and what is called life and what is called death" (Emerson 1844:42) (italics mine).

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