

q & a with
REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

By what right is Benedictus Spinoza included in the canon of great Jewish thinkers?

The question is taken up in *Betraying Spinoza* (Schocken/Nextbook, 2006), Rebecca Goldstein's investigation into the mind and more daringly the heart of Benedict Spinoza. Spinoza was a philosopher, "strict rationalist," and apostate; Goldstein is a novelist and intellectual. For the fourth book in Nextbook's "Jewish Encounters" series, she illuminates his keystone works, the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In this interview with *Contemplate*, she discussed his Jewishness (which he himself disavowed), his conception of god (complicated), and "politicians who go where philosophers fear to tread."

Contemplate: Spinoza was a strict rationalist, but you use empathy and imagination—a novelist's tools—to understand him. Is that the only way you "betray" him?

REBECCA GOLDSTEIN: OH, I BETRAY HIM FAR MORE than by the occasional flexing of the imaginative musculature, though that flexing is symptomatic of the general sort of treachery I commit in the book.

Spinoza is an extremist on behalf of a view I call "radical objectivity" and he called the view "*sub specie aeternitatus*," under the guise or form of eternity. From that point of view, uncompromisingly impersonal, the differentiating particulars of an individual life retreat into irrelevance—even one's own life. To reform one's mind so that it consists, as much as is possible, of the view *sub specie aeternitatus* is Spinoza's path to what he calls blessedness.

A project like mine, trying to seek to better understand what Spinoza was about in espousing radical objectivity by placing it in a personal context, both his and mine—this is the closest to

writing personal memoir I've ever come and ever want to come—is a betrayal. By looking at Spinoza's viewpoint in this way I'm *ipso facto* violating it.

And then I add insult to injury by claiming that the personal backstory of Spinoza is very much a Jewish story. From the point of view of radical objectivity, the group into which one happens to have been born matters not a hoot. All such contingencies over which one has no control are ultimately irrelevant to who one is or who, in any case, one ought to become. And Spinoza is particularly intent on denying one's religious heritage as central to one's path to blessedness, the *rational* blessedness he preaches, since that path is paved by beliefs, by the rigorously objective and rational reformation of one's beliefs about the nature of the world. And religion, of all the contingencies into which one is born, is the one most pernicious to this path because it is—or claims to be—cognitive. It offers its own set of beliefs about the nature of the world.

So to even look at Spinoza, and his espousal of radical objectivity, from the particular point of view of a Jewish series (which is what this book was published as part of), to bring in his own personal history as well as my own (because again that is the mandate of this series, which is called “Jewish Encounters”) is *ipso facto* to betray him.

However, I also want to claim that by betraying him in this way, viewing him not *sub specie aeternitatus* but as a man caught within, and responding to, the web of history, I also betray him in that secondary sense of the word, that of revealing something.

I want to ask you about Spinoza’s very unorthodox (in both senses) conception of God. But first: could you expand on that second betrayal, i.e. the inclusion of Spinoza in the “Jewish Encounters” series. What is the case for Spinoza’s Jewishness?

SPINOZA’S ONLY FORMAL EDUCATION WAS IN the yeshiva, the Talmud Torah, of Amsterdam’s Portuguese-Jewish community. He was thoroughly versed in Jewish sacred texts: not only the Five Books of Moses (which he argues were certainly not written by Moses) and the prophets; but also in Maimonides and Kaballah. There are subtle ways in which these Jewish influences informed Spinoza’s mature thinking.

But far more important than this is, I think, the emotional impact on Spinoza of Jewish history. He was brought up in a community that had been severely traumatized by the cataclysm of the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. Almost all the men and women of Spinoza’s parents’ generation (including his parents) had been born as Catholics in Portugal (Judaism had been outlawed in both Spain and then Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century) and were now reattaching

to historical Judaism within the freedom that seventeenth-century Amsterdam provided. Quite a few of them had been, to some extent, Maranos while they lived in Portugal, those who outwardly practiced Catholicism but clung to their secret identities as Jews. Any detection of this secret identification and they would be brought before the truly brutal force of the Inquisition.

Given these historical circumstances, the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam had certain very distinctive preoccupations concerning questions of personal identity and Jewish identity. I think some of these preoccupations found their way into Spinoza’s philosophy. In some sense, Spinoza is trying to solve the problem of Jewish suffering, a problem which he felt, which he couldn’t have failed to feel, given the sort of community he grew up in. For Spinoza, it’s irrational and therefore unethical to identify particularly with some group of people just because one happened to have been born into that group. Nevertheless, I think that Spinoza did, at least partly, identify with Jewish history, enough so that he tried to think his way out of its awful dilemmas, to think his way into a point of view in which Jewish history—any group’s particular history—doesn’t ultimately matter.

Right, but we have so little to go by. As you write in *Betraying Spinoza*, Spinoza left behind few personal documents—a few letters; the opening paragraphs of the unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Understanding*. Is it possible to arrive at an intuitive understanding of Spinoza by reading his philosophical works—for example, the *Ethics*?

BY “AN INTUITIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SPINOZA” you might mean either an understanding of his philosophy or of the man himself. I’d say that both are pretty hard to arrive at through

reading Spinoza's *Ethics* on one's own. When I teach my Spinoza seminar I feel as if I'm really earning my salary (such as it is).

The *Ethics* is, as the view of radical objectivity would demand, an extraordinarily impersonal and uncompromisingly austere work. It takes some work to see, to get my students to see, the pulsing life behind the rigid formalism. Insofar as learning the sort of person that Spinoza was, there's precious little of any autobiography in the *Ethics*. It's about as personally telling as a mathematical proof, which is what it aspires to being. And yet, and yet, he does betray himself at times, even within the *Ethics*, and even more so in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, which probably grew out of the lost *apologia* he penned right after his excommunication. Spinoza's disapproval of establishment religion comes through louder and clearer there, sometimes verging on fury of an almost personal sort.

This may be the time to get back to God. Albert Einstein, when asked if he believed in God, famously responded that he believed "in Spinoza's God." Who was Spinoza's God? (or should I say, *what* was Spinoza's God?) How does he/it differ from the God of the Hebrew Bible?

OK, I'LL DO THE BEST I CAN HERE. AND YOU'LL just have to take my word for it that I'm standing on one foot while I'm writing this:

Spinoza famously identified God and nature, and it's hard not to misunderstand him here. For one thing, he wasn't a pantheist of a tie-dyed-circa-nineteen-sixties-what's-that-you're-smoking sort. He certainly didn't believe that God existed in the babbling brooks and whispering pines. His notion of nature was very abstract, similar to the notion of the final Theory of Everything that string theorists dreamily murmur about in their sleep and

that Einstein probably had in mind when he called himself a Spinozist. This would be the theory that would not just state the complete set of fundamental laws of all of nature, but that would also explain why these laws of nature, and none other, had to be the laws of nature. In other words, the Theory of Everything would explain, literally, everything, including why it itself was the final Theory of Everything. Everything, after all, includes itself. This captures what Spinoza had in mind when he calls God the *causa sui*, the thing that explains itself. Spinoza believed that there had to be a final Theory of Everything, and this theoretical entity is his conception of both God, the final explanation, and of nature, the explained. The string theorist Stephen Hawking, for example, is speaking pure Spinoza in the famous last paragraph of *A Brief History of Time*, when he writes that if we had that final theory, the one that explains why it is the final theory, that would be the ultimate triumph of human reason for "then we would know the mind of God." Spinoza takes it one step further. It isn't that the Theory of Everything is the blueprint God used in creating the world, so that, knowing the theory, we'd know what God had in mind. The Theory of Everything *is* the mind of God. The Theory of Everything, in fact, is God. It's both the realized world and it's the explanation that the world had to realize. That's Spinoza's conception of *Deus sive natura*, the thing that can be conceived alternatively as God or as nature.

I guess the above paragraph, if it's coherent at all, should shed some light on the ways in which Spinoza's God bears little resemblance to the God who goes walking in the breeze of the evening in the Garden of Eden and from whom Adam and Eve hid their nakedness. Many of Spinoza's



contemporaries, and post-contemporaries, found his use of the word “God” so eccentric and, they charged, disingenuous, that they didn’t hesitate to call him an atheist. In fact, even throughout the eighteenth century “Spinozism” was another word for atheism.

Still, Spinoza’s conception of God bears some similarities to the traditional religious conceptions of God we find in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is, first of all, the final explanation, the explanation beyond which there simply is no more “why?” It’s also, for Spinoza, an object of adoration; to know God is necessarily to love God, to take sustained pleasure in the beautiful (in the same sense in which mathematics is beautiful) self-explanatory system, the apprehension of which spreads our minds out just as far as they’re capable of going, a state which Spinoza calls the Intellectual Love of God. (But beware: “he who loves God cannot desire that God will love him in return,”¹ for that would be to desire that God not be God. After all, can

you expect the Theory of Everything to love you?)

A major divergence between Spinoza’s God and traditional religious conceptions of God is that for Spinoza the concept of God’s will is meaningless. (I’m switching feet now.) We can’t resort to God’s will in explaining either why there’s a world at all or why there are objective differences between right and wrong—which are the two fundamental explanations that traditional religions have to offer. Spinoza’s God, the Theory of Everything, explains why it is the theory and why it—and therefore the world—had to be realized. To know God is to know that the world couldn’t possibly have been otherwise. God’s will is a null concept when it comes to explaining why there is something rather than nothing. So, too, when it comes to ethics. For Spinoza there are ethical truths—his magnum opus is called, after all, the *Ethics*—but the real difference between right and wrong action follows from the truths of human nature and what truly benefits and harms us, rather than from the will of God. Again, for

¹ Part V, Prop. XIX, the *Ethics*

Spinoza, the concept of God's will is meaningless. Spinoza would take normative ethics out of the religious sphere. We don't need to appeal to God to know that each person deserves to be treated with dignity and compassion. Spinoza attempts to deduce this from the truths of human nature. It's perhaps this last point that puts him most at odds with traditional religion, as it seems to render traditional religion as at best redundant, insofar as teaching us the proper way to live, and at worse downright pernicious, in reinforcing the power of the clergy to prey on our fears of mortality and reduce our already pretty feeble capacity for rationality below the detectable range.

Here's one aspect of Spinoza though that is strikingly similar to traditional Judaism's. For Spinoza studying is an ethical—a spiritual—activity. The purely rational knowledge of God that enlarges our minds and delivers us to the highmindedness of seeing everything, including ourselves, *sub specie aeternitatus*, is transformative. He's telling us to "sit and learn."

But that highmindedness—and the quest for it—carried such a cost! One of the remarkable passages in your book contains the actual writ of excommunication from the 1600's. Some of it (the writ, not your book) is so over-the-top as to be almost comic: "We excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza," it reads, and then, leaving no room for confusion: "The Lord will not spare him...and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven." Given the Biblical fury summoned up in the writ, it may not be shocking that Spinoza became a secular citizen—something practically unheard of in his time (mid 1600's) and place (Amsterdam). He became, as well, a champion of the secular state. Was he the first to envision a church/state separation?

SPINOZA HAS IMPORTANT PREDECESSORS IN THIS regard, for example Machiavelli who, despite the

slur that has come to be connoted by his name, was an outspoken champion of getting the clergy out of politics. But Spinoza is quite original in trying to derive his views regarding the separation of church and state from views concerning the legitimacy of the state in the first place. This is what you'd expect from him—a "first principles" guy if ever there was one. For Spinoza the only justification for the state, which requires that citizens give up some of their natural rights, is that it provide protection for us so that we can pursue our full human potential, which is, of course, realized in the absolute freedom to think—to sit and learn. So for Spinoza any state that would curtail this freedom to think and philosophize undermines its own right to exist. A state that tries to tell us what to think by giving too much power to the clergy; a state which hampers in any way the development of the sciences especially by allowing the clergy to weigh in on scientific findings—intelligent design, anyone?—is a state that has delegitimized itself.

I'd like to go back to the *Ethics* for a moment. In *Betraying Spinoza* you channel your yeshiva teacher, who decries the *Ethics* as, well, unethical (though, as you argue, it was anything but). Could you explain the relationship—as Spinoza understood it in the *Ethics*—between reason, knowledge, and virtue?

REASON IS THE ONLY WAY THAT WE CAN ATTAIN knowledge; the world itself is woven of the stuff of reason and our faculty of reason can alone yield us knowledge of the world. Lens-grinder that he was, he offers us an ocular metaphor for the cognitive form of his choice: "For the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees things and understands, is none other than proofs." Authority, faith, prophecy, revelation: all pose falsely as means

to knowledge. Dispassionate reason, faithfully tracing out the facts of reality, whether those facts favor us or our kind or not, can alone yield us the true picture of the world. To submit oneself to reason's guidance, whether or not it reveals a world that is to our liking, that flatters our sense of our own importance, is our only salvation. The submission to the view *sub specie aeternitatus* itself signifies the taming of the raging ego, always trying to make itself out as something more important in the world, erecting whole metaphysical views of chosenness and the like in order to cast the world in the shadow of one's own small self. Simply to be able to see the world as reason forces us to see it, not as we'd like it to be in order to assuage our feelings of helplessness and lack of cosmic importance, but as it objectively is, signifies an ethical achievement. "Sit and learn," Spinoza tell us, and thus achieve virtue.

That would seem to imply some abandonment of ego—the ego borne out of our sense of "cosmic importance." Is that what Spinoza wanted? For us

to develop an ego-less, and less selfish, self?

THE GOAL OF THE *ETHICS* IS TO INDUCE US TO be rational, which means both seeing things as they really are and also acting in our own best self-interest, which is only rational.

Spinoza never asks one to relinquish one's whole-hearted devotion to one's self. One cares about one's self in a unique way, without requiring any premises or philosophical argument whatsoever.

The rock-bottomness of one's self-concern isn't a matter of selfishness; it's a matter of basic metaphysics. That investment that each thing has in itself constitutes, for Spinoza, the very fact of its identity. What does it mean to be

me, this very thing and not another? I am this thing, Spinoza says, because I am essentially and primitively committed to the persistence and flourishing of this thing. Spinoza doesn't just make of each thing's devotion to itself an empirical fact, but a metaphysical fact. So there's just no question of asking a person to give up on her self-investment. That would be asking a person not to be the person she is.

But here's the curious, almost paradoxical thing: a certain distancing toward one's self occurs in the very process of best pursuing one's self-interest, namely by being rigorously rational. By being rationally devoted to one's self one actually ends up dissolving the borders of the self—merging one's personal viewpoint into one of radical objectivity, from which point of view one's own connection with one's self, primitive and essential as it is, can seem the flimsiest contingency. By rigorously pursuing one's true self-interest—uncompromising rationality—one arrives at a viewpoint of such radical objectivity about one's self that one can never quite inhabit one's own self in the same way again. One sees that the only thing that makes one's own desires feel so special in the world is that they happen to be one's own desires, a fact of trifling significance, from the point of view of radical objectivity.

Yes, even the most rationally objective of us will pursue her own life—who else's life is one supposed to pursue, after all? But one's point of view toward one's self will be tempered by the view from outside of one's self, and this outside view of oneself will affect how one sees others—relentlessly pursuing their own interests, too, no different, in their relation to their desires as one is in the relation to one's own desires.

So the endpoint of rationally pursuing one's

self-interest will be to view others as one views oneself—or, what comes to the same thing, to view oneself as one views others.

But notice that this elevated disinterestedness is arrived at through rationally pursuing one's own self-interest. And there is no room at all for sentimentality, for empathy's use of imagination. (I personally give empathetic imagination more credit than Spinoza does.)

Spinoza died relatively young, however. How close did he come to that "endpoint" where one achieves "radical objectivity"?

WELL, HE MANAGED TO COMPLETE THE *ETHICS*, which lays out his entire system. It's a work of such audacious ambition, attempting to deduce everything—not only the grand structure of reality and how we ought to live but even basic views on psychology (some of them astoundingly prescient) and physics (basically all wrong). So on the theoretical, abstract level he must have felt quite gratified.

But then there's the practical, concrete level. As far as his own personal life went he seemed to live pretty much as he preached. He tells us in the *Ethics* that the rational life leads to excising all the negative emotional reactions to things that we just have no control over. Anger and resentment and outrage, for example. Those were passions that he obviously had to fight to overcome in himself. He did have a tendency toward outrage at what he saw as the rampant small-mindedness and triumphant stupidity of mankind; he clearly struggled to overcome his own anger. In fact, there are reports that, if in conversation he became incensed, he would excuse himself and leave the room until he had regained his philosophical calm.

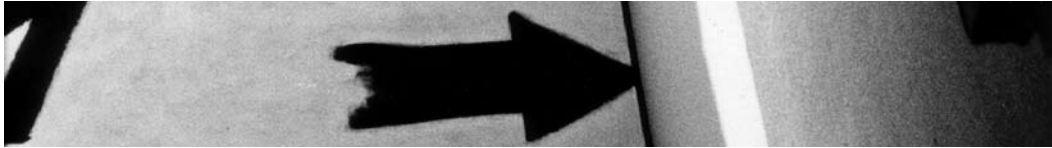
Spinoza, you could say, had three goals: to understand reality, to find comfort and salvation in that understanding, and to change the world, to make it more rational, a place that provides the safety and stability for full human potential to be realized (which is why he got into political philosophy).

I think that he thought he had accomplished the first two goals. But there's no way he could have felt, even in his most sanguine moments, that he'd accomplished the last. He was more successful than he could have dreamt, but the progress he prompted was slow, barely discernable during his lifetime. And it's still treacherously, tragically slow. People are still slaughtering others for not sharing their groundless beliefs; governments are still dangerously mixing religion and politics; there are still states that are undemocratic religious tyrannies, and they are living up to the doomsday prophesy of Spinoza, that such tyrannies threaten all, not just the citizens of their own states.

Spinoza's work is slow.

A final question—this one practically obligatory: What would Spinoza make of our present situation in the United States? Would he see parallels—given the ascendancy of religion and religious rhetoric in the public and governmental spheres—between our day and his own day?

AT THE END OF *BETRAYING SPINOZA* I CLAIM THAT there's a certain line of influence that extends from Spinoza's views on political philosophy—most especially his claim that the legitimacy of the state derives from the inalienable right that each person has to think for themselves—that in some sense the highest goal of the state is to ensure the



stability so that we can pursue the task of rational enlightenment—to the thinking of the Founding Fathers of America. This was a country conceived in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which Spinoza’s thinking had a profound effect on.

Spinoza’s views about the legitimacy of the state led him to deduce not only the superiority of democracy to all other forms of government—in contrast to Hobbes, whose views on the sources of the state clearly influenced Spinoza but who opted for monarchy—but also to insist on the separation of church and state, most especially as this involved limiting the power of the clergy. He saw enormous harm in allowing any sectarianism to influence the governing of the state. He would have grinned widely at many of the statements of our Founding Fathers, to the effect that this was not to be a Christian nation, and not even a nation in which all could attend the church of their choosing, but also a nation in which citizens could choose no church at all. This country’s highest ideals were all conceived in the philosophy of Spinoza, and to the extent that we diverge from the views of that renegade Jew we compromise our American ideals.

Obviously Spinoza would not be pleased by any erosion, in this brilliantly conceived government of ours, of the separation of church and state, by political leaders who proclaim this a Christian nation, and by policy decisions, regarding issues like stem cell research, that are made on strictly sectarian grounds.

One more thing, and that concerns the truly alarming attitudes toward science in this country, with such inanities as stickers being put on biology textbooks, in certain states, warning the students that the book contains the theory of evolution. Spinoza says in his *Theological-Political Treatise* that, since the legitimacy of government derives from its necessity for keeping society safe and stable enough so that full human potential for knowledge and creativity can be achieved, a government that hampers the full and free development of the arts and sciences has undermined its own right to exist.

The fundamental political fact Spinoza insisted on was that the state has no business mixing into the pursuit of truth. Beware those politicians who go where philosophers fear to tread.

Rebecca Goldstein is the author of *Betraying Spinoza* (Schocken/Nextbook, 2006), an intellectual biography of Benedict Spinoza, which received the Koret International Prize for Jewish Thought. Her fourth novel, *Mazel* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), and her second novel, *Strange Attractors* (Penguin, 1993), each won the National Jewish Book Award, and in 1996 she received a MacArthur fellowship for her novels of ideas. She has also received a Guggenheim fellowship and is a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. Goldstein received her Ph.D. from Princeton University, and is presently a fellow of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
