

The Legacy of Spinoza
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On July 27, 1656 the council of Jewish elders at the Amsterdam synagogue announced this banishment of Bento Spinoza,

The chiefs of the council do you to wit, that having long known the evil opinions and works of Baruch de Espinoza, they have endeavoured by diverse ways and promises to withdraw him from his evil ways, and they are unable to find a remedy, but on the contrary have had every day more knowledge of the abominable heresies practiced and taught by him, and the enormities committed by him . . . the said Espinoza should be excommunicated and cut off from the nation of Israel; and now he is hereby excommunicated with the following anathema:

Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night. Cursed be he in sleeping and cursed be he in waking, cursed in going out and cursed in going in. The Lord shall not pardon him, the wrath and fury of the Lord shall henceforth be kindled against this man . . . And we warn you that none may speak to him by work of mouth nor by writing, nor show any favour to him, nor be under one roof with him, nor come within four cubits of him, nor read any paper composed or written by him.¹

The banishment of Spinoza was a serious and unusual matter. The Jewish synagogue of Amsterdam was not in the habit of permanently banishing its members and the anathemas of Spinoza's banishment, as you heard, were severe. No communication of any kind with any member of the synagogue, including his family. After 1656 Spinoza was alone, in a precarious social and religious world.

Bento Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632 shortly after his parents emigrated from Portugal (one year before Galileo was placed under house arrest by the Inquisition). The early years of Spinoza's life were spent at home, at the synagogue, and once his mother died, at his father's successful import business. Like most Amsterdam Jews they spoke Portuguese, Spanish, or Hebrew among themselves, and Dutch only when needed. Miguel, although a proper dues paying member of the synagogue, seems to have been skeptical of excess ritual and religion. He did not prevent Spinoza from learning Latin. In 1654 Miguel died, and Spinoza, then 22, and his brother, Gabriel, took over the family business.

What did Spinoza do to incense his elders? He hadn't published anything yet. Were people upset that he chose to learn Latin (which was unusual), that he was making friends with religious renegades; Quakers, Mennonites, and lapsed Catholics? The

¹ Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (2003), 253.

Jewish community had only a fragile peace with the tolerant Dutch civil authorities. They could not evangelize or marry outside their community, they had to believe in God, and they needed to be quiet. Was Spinoza doing or saying something to draw the dangerous attention of orthodox Dutch Calvinists? We don't really know. All we know is that Bento Spinoza accepted his banishment without protest, explanation, or rebuttal even though it permanently severed him from his home, the world of his childhood, his primary language, his neighbors, his congregational community, his chance to marry, his source of income and all the prestige and wealth that went with it. Spinoza gave up most of what he had known for something he prized more, intellectual freedom.

Although an exiled exile Spinoza never lacked for devoted friends, all of them gentiles. He is buried in The Hague at the New Church, a Protestant congregation. (In recent years the State of Israel lifted Spinoza's banishment.) Antonio Damasio, author of *Looking for Spinoza* notes that Spinoza's headstone reads *Caute!* ("Caution" in Latin), somewhat like the headstone of the philosopher Rene Descartes, also located in the Netherlands, which reads, "He who hid well, lived well."²

In 1661, seven years after his banishment Spinoza published his first work, *Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect* and a *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-being*. Spinoza editor G. H. R. Parkinson believes a passage in *Correction of the Intellect* offers the only opinion Spinoza ever gave on his banishment. He writes

After experience taught me that all the things which occur frequently in ordinary life are vain and futile; when I saw that all the things on account of which I was afraid, and which I feared, had nothing good or bad in them except in so far as the mind was moved by them, I resolved at last to inquire if there was some good which was genuine and capable of communication itself, and by which the mind would be affected even if all the others were rejected; in sum, if there is something such that, when it has been discovered and acquired, I might enjoy for eternity continuous and supreme happiness . . . Love towards a thing which is eternal and infinite feeds the mind with joy alone – a joy which is without sorrow of any kind; and it is this which is to be intensely desired, and sought with all our strength.³

This passage is vintage Spinoza. Out of the tremendous loss in his life, Spinoza quietly and thoughtfully chose to find and honor an eternal means of happiness. He did not sink into permanent depression. He did not give up. He did not become bitter. He made a choice for intellectual freedom and he stayed with it. He turned within and counseled himself towards both a positive attitude and source of eternal comfort. In this way he reminds me of two modern thinkers, logotherapist Viktor Frankl and theologian Paul Tillich. Frankl developed a theory of the power of personal choice. Paul Tillich is a twentieth century theologian who searched for a definition of God that offers infinite meaning.

My friend Eran maintains that Spinoza ushered in modern philosophy, which is why he sounds so familiar to us today. Spinoza reminds me of Frankl, Tillich, the Power

² Damasio, 19-21.

³Benedictus Spinoza, "Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect," quoted in *Spinoza Ethics and Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect*, revised by G. H. R. Parkinson, (1993), xi-xii.

of Positive Thought people, holistic practitioners (“the idea which cuts off the existence of our body cannot exist in our mind, but is contrary thereto”- *Ethics*), psychodynamic and behavioral thinkers (“If the mind were once affected at the same time by two emotions, when afterwards it is affected by one of them it will also be affected by the other” - *Ethics*). . But more than that, he also reminds me of other geniuses in history, Buddha, the Stoics, and even the framers of the American Constitution.

Spinoza lived frugally and quietly outside Leiden and The Hague, working as a glass grinder, grinding glass for spectacles and microscopes. He did not travel, but he did correspond and visit with some great Dutch thinkers, scientists, and even politicians. There are 86 surviving letters to and from Spinoza dealing with a range of issues, from chemistry and comets, to laws of motions and his own experiments on pressure. Spinoza was heavily influenced by the contemporary philosopher Descartes, but developed ideas different from him.

Spinoza appears to have been temperate, diligent, patient, engaged, and flexible (again, given his isolated and sparse circumstances this seems unusual). He withheld publication of his most controversial works until after his death. Then he had them published in Latin (so they would be read by educated people who could possibly understand them without over-reacting). In addition, he neither attacked nor avoided organized religion. He challenged orthodoxy, but not religion, and not the Jewish community that banished him.

He spent all his time with gentiles. He could have converted to Christianity, been an “example” of a converted Jew. Instead almost like a UU, he embraced Jesus as a moral teacher, and that was it. He went no farther. Damasio suggests that Spinoza understood the fragile, importance of the Jewish community in Amsterdam and perhaps even its difficulty and decision to banish him. Unlike some of us who come to Unitarian Universalism with a chip on our shoulder about our former religious experiences, Spinoza moved aside and onward (compare with Michael Servetus).

Spinoza is considered difficult to read and understand, but that, I confess, is my perception of all philosophers, so don’t be deterred by his reputation for difficulty. At times he is impossible to understand. His work, *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*, is written as a series of textual geometric equations and contains Prefaces, Propositions, Proofs, Axioms, Corollaries, Notes and Definitions. It offers in depth analysis of Spinoza’s ideas about God, happiness, freedom, and rational and ethical living. Please read *Ethics* so you can be awed by genius. Spinoza was systematic and left almost no stone unturned in his search for meaning and happiness in the human condition.

His work also reads as clear as a bell and it is just as enjoyable. I’ve never read a more exciting philosophical work than *Ethics*, but then again it deals intimately with religion and philosophy, an arena where I spend my life. It delves into the questions I ask and the problems I see, so I loved it. I delighted in his direct, clever, insightful use of language.

Here are some of his ideas on the difference perspective makes (let this be a lesson to UUs still learning about the multiple forms of diversity within our congregation, down to whether or not we can appreciate both the piano and the organ)

“If the motion, which the nerves receive by means of the eyes from objects before us, is conducive of health, those objects by which it is caused are called beautiful;

if it is not, then the objects are called ugly . . . All of which sufficiently shows that each one judges concerning things according to the disposition of his own brain, or rather takes for things that which is really the modifications of his imagination . . . ‘As many minds as men,’ ‘Each is wise in his own opinion,’ ‘As tastes differ so do minds’ – all of which proverbs show clearly enough that men judge things according to the disposition of their brain, and had rather imagine things than understand them.”⁴

Even more challenging for his day, here are his ideas about a personal God

“It has come about that each individual has devised, in accordance with his own nature, different ways of worshipping God, that God may love him above the rest and direct the whole of nature for the gratification of his blind cupidity and insatiable avarice.”⁵

Spinoza is devastatingly dismissive of those who think God causes destruction as a sign of divine disfavor. He notes that destruction strikes the pious and impious alike and compares refuge in the “will of God” to “the asylum of ignorance.”

However, Spinoza did believe in God, just not a personal God. As Damasio notes, there is no one to pray to in Spinoza’s system. Instead, Spinoza believed that God was immanent (present), eternal, unique, and that God was predetermined through God’s “absolute nature or infinite power.” In *Ethics* he writes, “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God.”⁶ This is one of the best definitions of pantheism I have ever read.

Some say that the infinite power Spinoza defines is not God, and the system he describes is not a religion. But as Parkinson notes, and many UUs would understand

It is hard to see how Spinoza’s concept of religion can have any place for the concept of worship, or of petitionary prayer. Some might argue, however, that these concepts are not necessary to religion. What is necessary, they would say, is the idea that human beings are part of a whole, and one which is in some way a rational whole.⁷

This is a modern interpretation of a modern philosopher. In 1677 Spinoza’s ideas were a religious Molotov cocktail. As you may have already guessed, *Ethics* was published posthumously and secretly by Spinoza’s loyal and trusted publisher. Spinoza was wise enough to suppress his most controversial writing until after his death in 1677. *Ethics* was condemned by the Calvinists, the Vatican, the Jews, and banned in Holland and most of Europe. Spinoza knew his public.

A century later Voltaire wrote of Spinoza

⁴ Benedictus Spinoza, *Ethics*, “First Part: Concerning God, Appendix,” in *Spinoza Ethics and Treatise on the Correction of the Intellect*, revised by G. H. R. Parkinson, (1993), 36.

⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, “First Part: Concerning God,” Appendix, 32.

⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, “First Part: Concerning God,” Proposition XV.

⁷ Parkinson, xxii.

Poor but satisfied, pensive and reserved,
 A subtle but hollow spirit, less read than celebrated,
 Hidden under the mantle of Descartes, his mentor,
 Walking with measured steps, comes close to the great being:
 Excuse me, he says, addressing him in a whisper,
 But I think, just between us, that you do not exist at all.⁸

Seven years before his death Spinoza published *Treatise on Theology and Politics*. In this work he defended freedom of speech and thought, championed the idea of a republican government, and challenged the idea that the Bible contains literal truths. Written 1670 it is a landmark in biblical criticism. As you may have guessed, this work enraged the orthodox Calvinists in Holland, and others elsewhere, and three years after its publication it was banned. Spinoza was wise enough to publish this work when Jan de Witt was alive, and then refrained from publishing anything after his death.

Jan deWitt was the Grand Pensionary who directed the Dutch Republic. He was extremely enlightened and owned copies of Spinoza's works. In 1672 he and his brother were brutally murdered and displayed in The Hague by a mob (the details of their deaths are gruesome beyond measure). After the murder of Jan deWitt, an era of greater Calvinist orthodoxy and conservatism began in the Netherlands.

Spinoza was devastated by these murders. For the first and only time in his life, he cried publicly and uncontrollably (not his banishment, but the murder of deWitt posed the greatest challenge he would face to his intellectual freedom). Spinoza wanted to post a sign by the remains of DeWitt and his brother that said "ultimate barbarians," but a friend locked him in his room so that he would not leave the house and also be murdered.⁹

I would like to know how Spinoza incorporated and made sense of this horrible loss, an expression of what I see as human evil. But as far as I have read, *Ethics* does not clearly address human evil. So we do not know. He who hid well lived well.

Before the Enlightenment began Spinoza was engaged in scientific discovery, biblical criticism, the power of positive thinking, psychodynamic and behavioral thought, the support of republican governments, free speech, humanism, and pantheism. He was an intellectual giant who channeled his genius and social circumstances from external exile into endless internal exploration. Perhaps by 1656, even though not published, the Jewish elders of Amsterdam just knew they had trouble on their hands, a mind on fire, a spirit of strength and discipline, a quiet, dignified, intellectual giant whose ideas could not be contained by family, religion, community, or government. His sorrow was living in an intolerant age. His joy was in choosing his terms and transcending that age.

His parents named him Bento, "blessed" in Portuguese. He was called Baruch in the synagogue, "blessed" in Hebrew. He chose the name Benedictus after his banishment, "blessed" in Latin. Blessed by birth, religion, and choice, the same man regardless of exile, discrimination, or persecution. Spinoza would say he was an emanation of God, neither good nor bad, more often imagined than understood, never cursed by God since God is not a person who speaks, and by choice blessedly self-determined, in harmony with emotion, reason, and God.

⁸ Translated by Damasio, 258.

⁹ Damasio, 20-21.

