

Baruch Spinoza

Born Benedito de Espinosa in Amsterdam, in the Dutch Republic in 1632 he was a Jewish- Dutch



philosopher of Portuguese Sephardic origin. By laying the groundwork for the Enlightenment and modern Biblical criticism, including modern conceptions of the self and the universe, he came to be considered one of the outstanding figures on 17th century rationalism.

He lived an outwardly simple life as an optical lens grinder, and died aged 45 in the Hague in 1677. Along with Descartes he is considered one of the leading philosophical figures of the Dutch Golden Age. His *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, was published after his death, and earned Spinoza recognition as one of Western Philosophy's most important thinkers. His accomplishments and moral character earned him the epithet, “the prince of philosophers,” while his criticism of the Hebrew Bible caused the Jewish authorities to declare a *herem* against him, causing him to be effectively shunned by Jewish society at the age of 23.

His books were also later put on the Catholic Church's *Index of Forbidden Books*.

Spinoza's philosophy encompasses nearly every area of philosophical discourse, including metaphysics, epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of science. It earned Spinoza an enduring reputation as one of the most important and original thinkers of the seventeenth century. Samuel Shirley, who translated Spinoza's complete works into English, summed up the significance of Spinoza's philosophy:

“To my mind, although Spinoza lived and thought long before Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and the startling implications of quantum theory, he had a vision of truth beyond what is normally granted to human beings.”

He is mentioned by H. P. Blavatsky in “Isis Unveiled” and “The Secret Doctrine”:

“Bruno's and Spinoza's doctrines are nearly identical, though the words of the latter are more veiled, and far more cautiously chosen than those to be found in the theories of the author of the *Causa Principio et Uno*, or the *Infitino Universo e Mondi*. Both Bruno, who confesses that the source of his information was Pythagoras, and Spinoza, who, without acknowledging it as frankly, allows his philosophy to betray the secret, view the First Cause from the same stand-point. With them, God is an Entity totally *per se*, an Infinite Spirit, and the only Being utterly free and independent of either effects or other causes; who, through that same Will which produced all things and gave the first impulse to every cosmic law, perpetually keeps in existence and order everything in the universe. As well as the Hindu Swabhavikas, erroneously called Atheists, who assume that all things, men as well as gods and spirits, were born from Swabhava, or their own nature, both Spinoza and Bruno were led to the conclusion that *God is to be sought for within nature and not without*. For, creation being proportional to the power of the Creator, the universe as well as its Creator must be infinite and eternal, one form emanating from its own essence, and creating in its turn another.

“... every mystic philosopher . . . like Spinoza, all had one and the same object in view - MAN. It is Spinoza, however, who furnishes perhaps the truest key to a portion of this unwritten secret. While Moses forbids "graven images" of Him whose name is not to be taken in vain, Spinoza goes farther. He clearly infers that God must not be so much as *described*. Human language is totally unfit to give an idea of this "Being" who is altogether unique. Whether it is Spinoza or the Christian theology that is more right in their premises and conclusion, we leave the reader to judge for himself. Every attempt to the contrary leads a nation to anthropomorphize the deity in whom it believes, and the result is that given by Swedenborg. Instead of stating that God made man after his own image, we ought in truth to say that "man *imagines* God after his image," forgetting that he has set up his own reflection for worship.” (**“Isis Unveiled” Vol I, p. 93-94, 308**)

“It may be correctly stated that were Leibnitz’ and Spinoza’s systems reconciled, the essence and Spirit of esoteric philosophy would be made to appear. From the shock of the two - as opposed to the Cartesian system - emerge the truths of the Archaic doctrine. Both opposed the metaphysics of Descartes. His idea of the contrast of two substances - Extension and Thought - radically differing from each other and mutually irreducible, was too arbitrary and too unphilosophical for them. Thus Leibnitz made of the two Cartesian substances two attributes of one universal unity, in which he saw God. Spinoza recognised but one universal indivisible substance and absolute ALL, like Parabrahmam. Leibnitz, on the contrary perceived the existence of a plurality of substances. There was but ONE for Spinoza; for Leibnitz an infinitude of Beings, *from*, and *in*, the One. Hence, though both admitted but *one real Entity*, while Spinoza made it impersonal and indivisible, Leibnitz divided his *personal* Deity into a number of divine and semi-divine Beings. Spinoza was a *subjective*, Leibnitz an *objective* Pantheist, yet both were great philosophers in their intuitive perceptions.” (**“The Secret Doctrine” Vol. 1, p. 628-629**)

The following is her unfinished article, published posthumously, titled -

Spinoza and Western Philosophers

One of the greatest materialists that ever lived, and than whom no one adduced stronger arguments in defence of his theory - was Epicurus. The great, the virtuous, the noble and chaste Epicurus, who called the higher ends and *divine* laws mere inventions of the human mind, and rejected the idea of the human Soul as being immortal. Who of our modern positivists has ever said of the origin of our being, anything stronger than this: “The soul . . . must be material, because we trace it issuing from a material source; because it exists, and exists alone, in a material system; is nourished by material food; grows with the growth of the body; becomes matured with its maturity; declines with its decay; and hence, whether belonging to man or brute must die with its death.” And yet, he was a Deist and a Theosophist; for apart from a system entirely his own, the profound philosophy of which is evinced in the cohesive power of his school never equalled by any other ancient school of philosophy - he devoted his whole life to the study of natural sciences and the analysis of divine action in its relations to nature. His conclusion was that the Universe which is infinite could not be the product of divine action, since the existence of evil cannot be accounted for. Notwithstanding this, and though disbelieving in a God as an intelligent Principle, he admitted the existence of both a Supreme Being and gods or Spirits, living and immortal beings, of human shape but colossal proportions.

On the other hand, Spinoza was a recognized “systematic Atheist” as Bayle brands him; against whom was pronounced the terrific *Anathema Maranatha*, and whose system of negation

Malebranche terms a chimera both ridiculous and terrible. And yet, no more refined, spiritual nature than Spinoza's ever breathed upon earth. If by Epicurus abstract ideas were continually transformed into the gross concrete forms of a material Universe; by Spinoza the material conceptions of Science, from the Solar system down to the molecular structure of a leaflet, were mellowed down to the most Raphaelic hues, and the grossest substances assumed the shadowy, ethereal outlines of an ideal world. So much did this martyr of transcendent Theosophy impress himself upon the subsequent generations of thinkers that Schleiermacher speaking of "the holy but proscribed Spinoza" reaches the most touching pathos. "The Divine Spirit transfuses him," he says. "The infinite was his beginning and end, the universe was his only and everlasting love. In holy innocence and deep humility he mirrored himself in the eternal world, and saw also how he was its noblest mirror. *Full of religion was he, and full of a holy spirit*, and therefore he stands alone and unrivalled, master of his art, but exalted above profane Society, without disciples and without even citizenship!"

The conceptions of this "atheistical" Theosophist, about God are among the most original. Iron-bound as they are by the law of necessity reigning everywhere in physical nature, we find him solving the most abstract ideas by rigidly geometrical definitions. His is a system of metaphysical ideas from which evolve a series of theorems - a demonstration from the eight definitions and seven axioms of the first book of the *Ethica*.

One acquainted with the Hindu philosophy would be singularly reminded of both the Vedanta and that extreme Buddhist system known as the school of the Svābhāvikas. According to his ideas God is "a Substance consisting of infinite attributes each of which expresses an *absolutely* infinite and eternal essence." It follows that this Substance - necessary and infinite, one and indivisible, is God, the only Self-existence, All-Perfection and absolute Infinitude. Take away the name of the Deity, and you have here the abstract ideas about the only creative Power of the World, of the Svābhāvikas. "Nothing exists in the Universe but Substance - or Nature," say the latter. "This Substance exists by, and through itself (Svabhavat) having never been either created or had a Creator." "No" - echoes unconsciously Spinoza, "nothing exists in this world but Substance, and the modes of its attributes; and, as Substance cannot produce Substance there is no such thing as Creation." This is the claim of most of the Hindu philosophies. And again... It (creation) - says Spinoza, has no beginning and no end, but all things have to proceed or emanate from the Infinite One and will so proceed eternally. According to his philosophy, only two out of the innumerable infinite attributes of the Deity are known to us - extension and thought, the objective and the subjective of which He (the Infinite) is the identity. God is the only free Cause (*causa libera*), all other beings having neither free will nor contingency are moved by fixed laws of causation. The Deity is "*The causa immanens omnium*, not existing apart from the Universe," but manifested and expressed in it, as in a living garment." In the *Zohar* the creation or universe is also called "the garment of God" woven from its own Substance.

'Tis thus at the roaring Loom of Time I ply
And weave for God the garment thou seest Him by,

says Goethe, another German Theosophist in his *Faust*. And, in Vedanta, we find Brahma [i.e. Brahman rather than Brahmā] the *Absolute* God, unconscious of the Universe, and remaining ever independent of all direct relation to it. Says Pandit Pramadā Dasā Mitra of Benares - in his *Vedāntic Conception of Brahma*: "While the Vedāntin denies this mundane transitory consciousness to the Deity he declares . . . emphatically . . . that He is Consciousness Absolute . . . He and His Consciousness are not distinct . . . It is this permanent Self partially manifested [in man,] but prevailing all conscious beings that is the Omnipresent Spirit . . . The Vedāntin believes

that it (the world) *was* nothing and *is* nothing apart from the One absolute Being - God.” It is only when the Jewish philosopher speaks of the “attributes” of God - however infinite, that he differs from the Vedanta; for the latter allows man alone to call *his* consciousness an attribute of his soul “because it varies, whilst the consciousness (chaitanya) of God is one and unchangeable, hence no such distinction of substance and attribute holds with Him.” As to Spinoza’s Deity - *natura naturans* - conceived in his attributes simply and alone; and the same Deity - as *natura naturata* or as conceived in the endless series of modifications or correlations, the direct outflowing results from the properties of these attributes, it is the Vedantic Deity pure and simple. The same subtle metaphysical distinction is found in the mystery by which the impersonal Brahma - One and Indivisible, the *Absolute* “consciousness” - *unconscious* of the Universe, becomes through sheer metaphysical necessity Ísvara, the personal God, and brings himself into direct relation to the Universe - of which it is the Creator - respectively under the definitions of Māyā (illusion), Śakti (power) and Prakriti (nature).

So pre-eminent is the Vedantic Brahmā-Ísvara in Spinoza’s philosophy that we find this idea strongly colouring the subsequent views of Hegel, one of the philosophers who was the most influenced by the Jewish idealist. In the Hegelian scheme the *Absolute* asserts its rights to the fullest extent. Hegel declares that he would rather deny the existence of the material universe than to identify God with it. Fichte whose transcendental idealism was originally intended to amplify that of Kant, and served as a basis for Schelling’s Nature-philosophy had gone still further than Hegel in that direction. Unable to free human will from subjection to the iron laws ruling despotically all over physical nature, he denied the reality of both nature and law and denounced them as the product of his own mind - (māyā?). Hence he denied God, for in his philosophy the Deity is not an individual being but merely a manifestation of Supreme laws, the necessary and logical order of things, the *ordo ordinans* of the Universe. If we take in consideration that by a peculiar modification of language, that which the ancients called “Substance,” modern philosophy terms as the *Absolute*, or the *Ego*, we will find still more striking similarities between the pantheistical mysticism of the ancients and the extreme transcendentalism of today, whether in physical or spiritual sciences.

To sum up, then, whether with Robert Boyle one considers the Universe in the light of a gigantic clock-work and strives to fathom the mystery of that Self-existing Key, which winds it up so periodically and mechanically. Or, belonging to the class of those thinkers, whom the Duke of Argyll accused in his *Reign of Law* of constantly speaking of “mere ticketing and orderly assortment of external facts,” and is a Positivist. Or again maintains with Dr. Tyndall that “the order and energy of the Universe is inherent and not imposed from without, - the expression of fixed law and not of arbitrary will,” and is regarded as a materialist. Or yet, without being necessarily a Sectarian bigot, he reflects the early teachings of his childhood and regards God as a tangible, gigantic operative and intelligent Being, with personal attributes, who descends periodically into various Avatars, becomes a “divine male” like Viraj and others, and rejects a deity incomprehensible and incomprehensive - an invisible mist. Or following in the footsteps of the ancient Yogis, starts out in search of the Boundless and the Unconditioned One, and hopes of meeting face to face the Absolute and Subjective, or believes in Alchemy and expects to rival Raymond Lully in the art of making gold and finding the philosopher’s stone; or finally, like Iamblichus, or a modern Spiritualist, experiments in Theurgy and Spiritualism, and calls out forth superior and inferior spirits from the supermundane spheres . . .