

Spinoza's Jewishness

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To discuss Spinoza's Jewishness does not mean laying claim to Spinoza or making Judaism his denominational affiliation. It simply means acknowledging his critical significance for the formation of modern Jewish identity, whose distinctive character rests on a permanent negotiation of religious, cultural, and intellectual traditions.¹ Spinoza's stance represents a philosophical approach that plays a central, arguably even constitutive, role in the formation of modern Jewishness.

Detailed comparative studies seeking to link Spinoza's thought to medieval Jewish philosophy have led to framing Spinoza as a student on an unequal footing with his predecessors. Harry Wolfsohn's verdict has become notorious: there is nothing new and original in Spinoza.² Such a view pre-empted serious examination of the philosophical importance of Spinoza's Jewish reception; Spinoza was the renegade outcast standing in the shade as a dark reminder that Jewish philosophy has come to its end – or so Wolfsohn's argument went. However, despite and against Wolfsohn there has been a sense for some time now that Spinoza played a central role in the development of modern Jewish thought and can even be considered as a transition to it, if not the beginning of it. This is a trajectory that the conventional historiography of philosophy has largely ignored, even eclipsed.

Jewishness and Jewish Modernity

Jewishness is not to be misunderstood as a body of properties or a catalogue of doctrines, whether religious, cultural, or secular. "Jewishness" is rather the sign for recognizing a living, continuing tradition whose distinctive character resists and opposes reduction to the mainstream school of philosophy from Plato to Descartes. Spinoza is the only Jewish philosopher who has been accepted into the canon of Western philosophy. At the same time his incorporation into the canon has produced readings whose universalist focus stamps his Jewishness as a biographical blemish; the shadow cast, as it

were, by the shining brilliance of his radical rationalism. But for those wary of the project of modern universalism, Jewishness would mean more than just the blind spot of philosophy. It would signal the urgency of addressing a systematic problem at the heart of philosophy's standard conception of universalism.

Spinoza's Jewishness thus represents the problematic of modern Jewishness or, more precisely, the problematic of how the dominant forms of philosophy and culture respond to a philosopher, whether religious or secularized, who grounds his thought in a non-Christian or not exclusively Christian framework. In philosophical shorthand, Jewishness marks the challenge that the "universal" is no longer understood to subordinate the "particular" in a seamless fashion, as in the metaphysical tradition that views the relationship between God and creation in either "top-down" or "bottom-up" terms. Jewishness signals instead an alternative approach that cannot be contained in what is sloppily called the Judeo-Christian tradition but is more accurately called the Greco-Christian tradition.

Spinoza has had a curious destiny. It is a commonplace that he was Jewish, that he was banned from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, and that he was forced therefore to leave that community. Nevertheless, for the rest of the world he remained, as Leibniz calls him, "the Jew of Amsterdam." Spinoza's reputation undergoes a similar effect to that of Heinrich Heine, who will later say from his own experience that his baptism would only highlight his Jewishness the more he sought to wash it off. Heine's point was that baptism produced the opposite effect of what was desired; it would highlight *der nicht abzuwaschende* Jude, the Jew whose Jewishness could and would not be washed away.³ Baptism branded Heine even more relentlessly with the Jewishness he sought to shed. As a consequence, baptism seemed only to fixate and expose more openly a Jewishness that would not be allowed to assimilate.

Historically, Spinoza has been subject to a similarly qualified reception. The more Spinoza is read through a universalist lens, the more the need arises to tag him as a Jew. Jewishness, in other words, is the blind spot that places Spinoza in the contingency of history, of life, of experience, and the empirical. Or so it seems. His Jewishness resists dissolution into the universal, and is therefore conjured in spectral forms by a universalism self-

deprived of a particularity of its own. This explains the often curious shapes and forms in which his Jewishness figures into both the historiography and, even more tellingly, the systematic accounts and interpretations of his thought.

The Scandal of Jewishness

This phenomenon is what I call the scandal of Spinoza's Jewishness. I call it this because it demonstrates the haunting issue of how to situate – that is, address and think through – Spinoza as a universal philosopher with a distinctly particular background, but also how to comprehend the intellectual trajectory pointing from him to a self-consciously Jewish line of readings. The scandal of Spinoza's Jewishness is really the scandal of philosophy itself: philosophy finds itself deadlocked if urged to think the universal and the particular outside a hierarchy long recognized as questionable if not misguided.⁴

I see Spinoza's modernity now precisely in what exceeds conventional answers to what it means to be Jewish. Spinoza's Jewishness cannot be dissolved into elements of historic forms and elements of Judaism. His philosophical trajectory offers instead a different way to imagine Jewishness, one that boldly leads to modernity.

If we follow the thread of modern Jewish philosophers who have felt a family resemblance to Spinoza, we can trace the theme of addressing Spinoza's Jewishness as a distinct note – a continuo, as it were – in the pattern of modern Jewish self-clarification. In modern Judaism, Spinoza has become a shibboleth: the litmus test of one's or another's Judaism. From Moses Mendelssohn to Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, a continual debate unites and separates the positions on Spinoza; positions whose own respective Jewishness very often seems determined by the stand they take on Spinoza.⁵

If we assemble modern Jewish thought along the line of Spinoza reception, interesting patterns emerge. Warren Montag, editor of *The New Spinoza*, suggests a helpful way of grasping Spinoza's impact when he speaks of understanding Spinoza's profound effect on the French group around Louis Althusser, by referring to the "immanent cause" Spinoza has been for them.⁶ His point is that we can understand Spinoza's thought only

if we understand Althusser's thought, too, where an "immanent cause" manifests its substance only in its effects. Just as we understand Spinoza's critical significance better if we look at Althusser, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Etienne Balibar and others, so we get a better grasp of the full potential of Spinoza's critical thought if we consider the trajectory of the Jewish reception as it has expressed impulses and concerns of his thought.

There is an initial and inspiring tradition of resonance with Spinoza from Moses Mendelssohn and Heinrich Heine onwards, up to Leo Baeck and the young Martin Buber. In fact Spinoza became so much the symbol of liberal and even assimilationist Jewry – Georg Simmel is a representative – that this attracted strong opposition by critics of the liberal agenda of German Jewry. Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig are the most outspoken examples of Jewish philosophers, but Gershom Scholem, Leo Strauss, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno all unite in denouncing Spinoza who, for them, had become the symbol of what they rejected: German-Jewish liberal – and all-too-liberal – assimilation. Strauss and Carl Schmitt united in lamenting Spinoza's Jewishness, and Adorno and Horkheimer joined them in rejecting the fatally wrong-headed rationalist direction Spinoza's thought had presumably taken.

For Jewish critics who viewed German liberal Jewry's assimilation as betrayal, Spinoza became the symbol of the false direction German Jewry was heading. While liberal Jews were busy declaring Spinoza a philosopher fully compatible with the grand tradition of German idealism, a source of inspiration, and a co-equal to exponents of German philosophy like Hegel, the critics diagnosed such rhetoric as reckless underwriting of a bad rationalism they detected in German Jewish liberalism and that they saw genealogically linked to Spinoza. The battle over Spinoza has ever since been a proxy battle about what Judaism is to be.

Spinoza's Jewishness has been so contested because Spinoza unambiguously posed the challenge of self-definition from within. There is still a debate on the actual reasons that led to his exclusion. If the act of the *herem* or ban that pronounced him excluded from the Jewish community of Amsterdam was primarily an act of the community's self-assertion (a line of argument running through the whole debate on Spinoza's Jewishness), it has become impossible to separate discussion of Spinoza's Jewishness from

more general discussion of what Jewishness means in modernity.

We can fairly say that Spinoza has become an inspirational source, if not for Mendelssohn, Heine, Baeck, and others to say what Jewishness *is*, then for those like Cohen, Rosenzweig, Leo Strauss, and Emmanuel Levinas to say what Judaism *is not*. Ironically, it is the latter line of thinkers who propose reading Spinoza in accord with the traditional historians of philosophy who cast him as straightforward rationalist reaffirming rather than challenging the doctrines of rationalism. Against such a supposedly historical but questionably anachronistic reading, Mendelssohn and Heine initiated a different one in which Jewishness assumes its own respectable place in modern thought. Responding to what they see as Spinoza's imperative to rethink the task and approach of philosophy, they propose an approach that liberates Spinoza from appropriation to a canon he challenges in the first place.

We are All Culturally Protestants

Spinoza lived, worked, and wrote at a time shaped by Protestant concerns and sensibilities. It is thus understandable that he often relied on the language, thought, and ideas of Protestantism to express his views, not least because there were also many points that they shared. The question of priority seems a bit chicken-and-egg: Who was first, Spinoza or radical Protestantism? The question highlights the problem at hand. Spinoza develops his approach to Bible criticism, religion, and what he calls "the theological-political complex" in a constellation defined by an over-determined predicament where both Christian and Jewish theology call for critical examination of their claims and titles.

In this constellation Spinoza offers a view of religion that is resolutely non-denominational. His sociological perspective allows him to move to a comparative approach that no longer focuses on doctrinal and theological niceties but considers the functional aspect of religion in the social, political, and affective economy. The sociological insight of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter *TTP*) is not simply that Christianity has replaced Judaism, which as a consequence would then only be obsolete. Rather, the *TTP* highlights the *functional* equivalence of the two religions. Historical and hierarchical indices are replaced with the criterion of functionality.

One religion functions just like the other; it fulfills the same needs, only differently. Spinoza relegates the question of truth to philosophy, as he emancipates religion from the false burden of the philosophical problem of truth and frees it for its genuine task, namely piety and obedience, i.e., religiosity as spirituality and religious experience on the one hand, and guidance for moral action on the other.

As a consequence, Spinoza's conception of religion as a social practice whose true theology is its actions allows for a new way to theorize religions. No longer are they competitors in the religious war for truth but different, equally justified forms of religious life. Jewishness emerges then as a post-religious concept that remains constitutive for the individual's construction of difference. That Spinoza can so easily move in different Protestant circles, and that he can see himself as productively contributing to their religious life and learn from them without anxieties about losing his own identity, highlights the role Jewishness plays for him. Jewishness is the particularity allowing him to ground the universalism of his philosophical thought.

We can now grasp the deeper meaning of Hermann Cohen's stunningly provocative statement that all German Jews were culturally Protestants.⁷ As a resolutely self-conscious Jew, Cohen did not see anything demeaning or disadvantageous in considering himself culturally a Protestant. Rather, his assertion suggests we view modernity as an interconfessional project where Jews would often serve as creative forces to develop a culture that, for lack of alternatives, would appear to be Protestant. If you were to take a stand against any form of orthodoxy, then the most widely recognized language and culture available to argue your claim was the Protestant one. And if you were to inscribe Jewish difference in that project, what else could it look like than a more radicalized Protestantism? However, this does not imply that Jewishness would be forsaken; on the contrary, it signals the resilience of modern Jewishness as creative force.

If we apply this idea to Spinoza, a man Cohen little concealed to dislike, we can say that it's precisely his Jewishness that makes him look Protestant, because his most inner concerns could culturally only appear to be Protestant when they were most Jewish. From a Protestant viewpoint, it would just be the last step of formalization that would distinguish Spinoza

or any other modern Jew from an open pledge to the Protestant creed.⁸ From another viewpoint, however – let's call it the viewpoint of modern Jewishness – not taking this last step would not mean falling short of a normative expectation. On the contrary, it would be the consequence of consistently asserting one's own difference as alterity. That this alterity would be construed systematically as difference that is almost Protestant, or no longer traditionally Jewish, is not only a question of the problematic use of terminology. It is more significantly a reminder of the conflicting interests that deny what Spinoza, and others following him, have demonstrated as a viable alternative to institutionalized forms of religion: post-religious Jewishness as the model of an identity pointing beyond the conventional notion of religions as the standard model, with metaphysical options available.

A nineteenth-century historian of philosophy, Francis Bowen, provides a striking assessment of Spinoza's stand on, and between, different traditions that articulates the peculiar consequence this position has had for Spinoza's reception:

He was a Jew by birth, but soon ceased to be a Jew by religion, though without thereby becoming a Christian. Hence he was wittily compared to the blank leaf, which, in most editions of the Bible, separates the Old from the New Testament.⁹

For many, Spinoza certainly has been a blank screen onto which moving images of his reception could be projected. But, as Bowen suggests, the blank leaf is not just a screen for the universal potential of particular meaning but for what connects the old and the new; that is, two traditions that differ only inasmuch as they also share distinctly constitutive aspects. The blank leaf is then an image for Spinoza's significance as a philosopher and thinker of both identity and difference, aware of the fundamental insight that alterity is possible only where both aspects of the leaf are considered. The particular can only be inscribed on the universal, and the universal becomes legible only as the other side of the particular.

Postscript: Spinoza and Mennonites

The symposium convened by Mennonites to discuss Spinoza's significance for Jewish and Protestant traditions has helped me better understand Spinoza

beyond the mere academic context. Asked to reflect on his Jewishness by the event organizers, I attended to this issue in a different, more consequential way than I had before.

The particular synergy created by the symposium called for appreciating Spinoza's friendships in a new light. Intellectually rewarding for both Spinoza and his friends, their friendship was built on more than simply their shared concerns and, I would argue, it was particularly inspired by the differences leading them to rethink those very differences in positive terms, as productive and liberating, not in negative terms. For one thing, this suggested to Spinoza the rediscovery in the Jewish tradition of progressive, forward-pointing aspects that would also be attractive to Mennonites and others reconnecting with the progressive impulse of their own traditions. But it also challenged him to attend to the specificity of Jewish tradition in more universal terms, as a legacy that had already become a shared and "catholic" enterprise, no longer exclusionist as the various institutionalized forms of religion would claim.

This "Jewish" challenge is what made Spinoza an attractive interlocutor for those Protestants who shared his concern, just as he became an important source for them to reflect their own traditions with more consequence. We can grasp Spinoza's particular relevance in the same way we grasp the significance his Mennonite friends had for him: we must understand the inspiring moment of difference as the core of the modern concept of friendship informing their interaction and collaboration. This concept viewed friendship not as the result of social, cultural, or political identity but as the fruit of the dialogic dynamics in their relationship, making them see the other's identity and difference as a crucial element for the conception of their own self-understanding.¹⁰ For this reason, I am indebted to this symposium's conveners, who have given me the opportunity to revisit the question of the significance of Spinoza's engagement with his Mennonite friends.

Notes

¹ For a discussion of the differential character of traditions in general, see Willi Goetschel, "The Differential Character of Traditions," *Telos* 95 vol. 26 (1993): 161-70.

² Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza. Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* [1934] (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983); and Wolfson, *From Philo to Spinoza: Two Studies in Religious Philosophy* (New York: Behrman, 1977).

³ See Heine's letter to Moses Moser, 14 October 1826, in Heinrich Heine, *Werke, Briefwechsel, Lebenszeugnisse: Säkularausgabe* (Berlin: Akademie; Paris: CNRS), vol. 20, 265.

⁴ See the introduction "The Scandal of Spinoza's Jewishness" in my *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison and London: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

⁵ For the role Spinoza plays in modern Jewish self-understanding, see the discussion of the exemplary case of Hermann Levin Goldschmidt in Willi Goetschel, "Spinozas Modernität: Kritische Aspekte seiner politischen Theorie," in Marcel Senn, ed., *Ethik, Recht und Politik bei Spinoza* (Zürich: Schulthess, 2001), 209-24.

⁶ See Montag's introduction to Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, eds., *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁷ See Hermann Cohen's early essay, "Ein Bekenntnis in der Judenfrage" (1880), published in the context of the Berlin anti-semitism controversy, and his World War I essay, "Deutschtum und Judentum" (1915), both in Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), vol. 2, 73-94 and 237-301, particularly 77, 94, 242f.

⁸ The dramatic increase of conversions to Protestantism of Jews in Berlin at the turn of the 19th century and in the first decades following, besides being the result of social pressure, displayed at times a genuinely religious and spiritual motivation based on alienation from forms of Jewish traditions that no longer seemed to be in step with the times. This is a telling example of open conversions significantly different from the situation in the 17th century.

⁹ Francis Bowen, *Modern Philosophy from Descartes to Schopenhauer and Hartmann* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1877), 60.

¹⁰ For another often trivialized and profoundly misunderstood friendship based on the same modern premise of alterity rather than equality as its foundation, see Willi Goetschel, "Lessing, Mendelssohn, Nathan: German Jewish Myth Building as an Act of Emancipation" in John McCarthy, Richard Schade, and Herbert Rowland, eds., *Lessing International: Lessing Reception Abroad, Lessing Yearbook 32* (2000): 341-60.

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