

introduction: spinoza's provocation

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Friedrich Jacobi could not have foreseen that the reception history of Spinoza would vindicate his position that all philosophy ultimately results in Spinozism. Jacobi may not be right in the sense in which he made this point, namely, as a polemic against the Enlightenment and transcendental idealism. But he has been vindicated in the sense that Spinoza's philosophy has been appropriated by any conceivable philosophical standpoint. Spinoza has been presented both as a communist or as a liberal, as a democrat or as a republican, as a materialist or as an idealist, as an atheist or as "God intoxicated," as a proponent of "might is right" and as a fierce critic of power.

The list above can be expanded but that is not necessary here. Its key insight is clear: if something is all encompassing so as to include every difference within it, then it runs the risk of itself becoming indifferent, lacking conceptual rigour and ultimately without impact. We can formulate the peril of the elasticity that characterizes Spinoza's reception in the form of a rhetorical question: If Spinoza can stand for everything, then can he really stand for anything at all?

To avoid this conundrum, a double approach is required: First, we need to contextualize Spinoza's position. This will include an examination of the historical context of his argument. What are some of the specific influences that shape his thought? Jon Rubin explores what Spinoza gets from scholastic philosophy;

Jean-Marie Guyau examines how Stoicism and Epicureanism converge in Spinoza's thought; and, Dimitris Vardoulakis argues for the primary influence of Epicureanism.

The contextualization of Spinoza's position also needs to be forward looking so as to include the reception of his thought. This will inform us how certain interpretations have been arrived at as well as show us how far specific readings of Spinoza can go. Thus, Eva Schürmann underscores the importance of Herder's interpretation of Spinoza at the time in the late eighteenth century when Spinoza re-enters philosophical debate; Daniela Voss interrogates Balibar's reading of Spinoza, one of the most important interpretations of Spinoza's political thought in the twentieth century; and Janice Richardson evaluates Hampton's feminism that relies on Kant by turning to Spinoza.

Second, we need to closely analyse critical concepts of Spinoza's thought. This is all the more necessary today, given that Spinoza's philosophy is often appropriated piecemeal and second-hand in order to serve as justification for the motives of authors who, precisely, eschew any close reading of Spinoza's text.

Such an analytical procedure needs to be very mindful of Spinoza's language, especially his Hebrew, as Inja Stracenski demonstrates. It also needs to go through some key concepts and problems in Spinoza, such as the key problem of teleology that, as Filippo del Lucchese demonstrates, is the hinge that links his politics and metaphysics; his conception of thinking that, Thomas Kisser, departs from the rationalism that was prevalent in seventeenth century; the third kind of knowledge that may not be as elusive, as Katrin Wille argues, but is certainly critical for understanding Spinoza. It also needs to turn back to the individual to make sense of Spinoza's conception of agency, a task carried out by François Zourabichvili; or by identifying seemingly secondary concepts such as the slave that in fact are pivots in Spinoza's conception of the individual from his political perspective, as Michael Polos argues.

These two approaches are distinct but not separate. They present the provocation of Spinoza's thought for us today: how to retain the uniqueness of his thought and make it speak to our contemporary concerns, while being mindful of the danger of making it too malleable for the purposes of all sorts of positions that may in fact not be amenable to it.