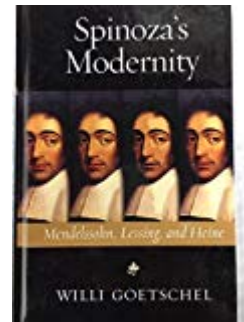


**Willi Goetschel.** *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. x + 351 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-299-19080-4.



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Although Spinoza's importance for the German eighteenth century has been the subject of numerous studies, Spinoza's precise role in the emergence and the persistence of a particular critical impulse in modern German thought has never been systematically studied.[1] More importantly, the exact nature of this critical impulse and its transmission in German thought and criticism in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has never been subjected to a rigorous reading. Willi Goetschel's book, *Spinoza's Modernity*, opens up, I believe for the first time, a crucial aspect of Spinoza's contribution to German writing during this period. The thread that weaves through the book is that of the "scandal of Spinoza's Jewishness," his status as an outsider and as a proponent of critical modernity.

There are essentially three arguments in Goetschel's book. The first is that a repressed and hidden Spinoza is still present in the German eighteenth century, and that this presence requires subtle interpretation to be fleshed out in all of its complexity. The second is that Spinoza's contribution to the German eighteenth century pro-

vides us with an alternative and, in Goetschel's view, more powerful model of critical modernity than the more "traditional" and certainly more widely discussed model that extends from Kant, Hegel, and Marx to Habermas. Finally, Goetschel's book makes the case that the alternative model of critical modernity that reverberates through and is developed by Lessing and Mendelssohn in the German eighteenth century, and Heine in the nineteenth, is marked by the Jewishness of Spinoza and his thought.

There are several areas for discussion here: first, while the book strongly suggests that Spinoza's particular brand of modernity, and its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interpreters escape the dichotomous, dualistic, rigidly rationalistic and deterministic-mechanistic views of modernity expressed in Descartes, Hobbes, and others, what is the "other" modernity that serves as the foil for Goetschel's argument? Secondly, Goetschel believes that the argument advancing this other model of modernity and Spinoza's Judaism are closely linked. Are they? That is, how Jewish is Spinoza's particular flavor of modernity

and to what extent is the "scandal of his jewishness" determinative in the particular strand of critical modernity in the German eighteenth century that Goetschel articulates?

The first part of *Spinoza's Modernity* is a reading of Spinoza's *Ethics* and his *Theological-Political Treatise* as documents of a radically new and provocative Enlightenment. In the introduction, Goetschel stakes out his terrain by asserting that a more differentiated, nuanced reading of Spinoza's work and its historical reception and appropriation are necessary. The simplistic use of the term "pantheism" to designate his thought and the predominance of the *Spinoza-Streit* with Jacobi in both the late-eighteenth century and its history have obscured, rather than illuminated, Spinoza's real grip on the era and its combatants. In chapter 1, entitled "The New Metaphysical Framework of Ontology," Goetschel characterizes Spinoza's modernity in terms of the critique it inaugurates of the central issues of metaphysics, epistemology and hermeneutics, and social and political philosophy of the mid-seventeenth century. Goetschel underscores the anti-hierarchical, anti-teleological, and constructivist character and import of Spinoza's system. In the metaphysical sphere, Spinoza takes sharp issue with Descartes's positing of the Ego as a firm and invariable ground for knowledge; and he rejects Leibniz's dualism as a troubling and ultimately degrading form of philosophical thinking for the human being and society. Instead of absolute metaphysical assertions, we have with Spinoza operational hypotheses, posited definitions and their implications, and dialogue of the part and the whole, without the priority of either one. Instead of coherence or congruence, Spinoza puts forth a parallelism of the affects and reason, the particular and the universal, the body and mind, while placing "the recognition of the constitutive moment of particularity for the production of knowledge at its center" (p. 44).

In chapter 2, "Understanding Understanding: Spinoza's Epistemology," Goetschel advances the theory of Spinoza's *On the Improvement of the Understanding* as a propaedeutic--not setting understanding as an object but rather as a process, with suggestions for its gradual improvement in history rather than strict rules for its perfection. Truth is conceived as a process rather than a static state or detached "quality" or "predicate," and the gradualistic, continuous, and dynamic nature of knowledge is constantly juxtaposed to the Cartesian discourse of a universalistic method to ensure objective truth once and for all. Navigating very carefully between the empiricist epistemology of Bacon, the Cartesian and Hobbesian models of knowledge, Spinoza, according to Goetschel, provides us with nothing less than a meta-theoretical reflection on truth and knowledge.

Chapter 3 traces the "Psychodynamic Theory of Affects" in Spinoza. While Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Hobbes all recognized the importance of the passions for a more comprehensive understanding of the human being, Spinoza was the first to attempt a sufficient explanation of the "operative nexus between the emotions, the passions, and the mind" (p. 45). Spinoza's ability to understand mind and body as different ways of considering or speaking about the individual points to a psycho-dynamic economy that regulates mind and body: "Replacing the dualistic, hierarchical model with one that attends to the psychosomatic whole, Spinoza's notion of the affects addresses the psychophysical nexus that constitutes human nature" (p. 49).

In "Spinoza's Theory of Religion, Hermeneutic, and Tradition," Goetschel shows how the argument of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is grounded in a hermeneutic, one that respects the integrity of the text and, at the same time, acknowledges the necessity of constant translation and ongoing interpretation. Spinoza was the first thinker to detach the political sphere from theology, thus the hyphenated title of the treatise itself.

History is nothing other than the history of scripture, with all of the glosses, translations, interpretations and readings, and thus the hermeneutic guidelines can only be those provided by "a critical grasp of the history of scripture itself" (p. 61). To be sure, one must become acquainted with the mind and the mentality of the author (*genius et ingenium*), but the interpretation of text is not the truth of the meaning disclosed by the process, but rather, as Goetschel puts it, contingent "on the recovery of meaning itself" (p.63), regardless of whether that meaning conforms to established doctrine. Here, however, an interesting aporia presents itself. While interpretations are "conditioned by socio-political processes contingent on the political order in which they are played out" (p.64), the difficulty is to square this with the assertion that all history is text/scripture and the process of translation/interpretation. In the hyphenation of the theological-political of Spinoza's *Treatise*, Goetschel reads both the subversion of the firm distinction between the two, their interpenetration, as well as the problematical and still-to-be-realized detachment of politics from theology referred to at the beginning of the chapter.

In chapter 5, Goetschel analyzes Spinoza's philosophy of the political order. In opposition to mere *Staatsraison* and instrumental reason, Spinoza's critique of contemporary political philosophy hinges on his observation of the inadequacy of the discourse of state power and the relinquishment of individual rights for the promise of security and peace. Right is not a result or effect of the individual giving up certain freedoms in order to live in a state of freedom from war and law, not the transfer of power from the individual to the sovereign in return for a lawful life and state, but rather a transfer of power between and among the people. Reason cannot and does not dictate in absolute terms what is right; nor does the individual's giving up right and bestowing that right in the state constitute sovereignty. While Goetschel is correct, I think, in the fundamental reading of Spinoza as a critique of both

the Hobbesian as well as a contractual theory, I think he "modernizes" Spinoza perhaps too far when he asserts: "Spinoza's definition of sovereignty does away with such a misguided approach and sets a new concept of the masses in its place" (p. 74); and, "Spinoza's political theory bases itself on the rights of the masses (multitude), and it does so in a forceful way" (p. 74). Spinoza's text reads: "Hoc jus, quod multitudinis potentia definitur, imperium appellari solet." The multitude here really denotes "the people," the multitude, as opposed to the nineteenth-century concept of the masses. The distinction is important, I believe, because the translation "masses," while seeking to show Spinoza's modernity, actually creates a historical anachronism. Right is derived for Spinoza from power over nature, and two people have more power, and therefore more "right," than one. Therefore, sovereignty enacts the power of the many, the multitude (read "people," <not> "masses") over the power of any one individual, such as Hobbes' Leviathan. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza was critical of mob mentality, the uncritical will of the masses, and he carefully distinguished the right constituted by and of the multitude from mob rule. How that multitude is to be defined is a historical, open question in Spinoza, and, it seems to me, a crucial open question for any theory of political right.

Parts 2, 3, and 4 deal with the appropriation and continuing reception and reinterpretation of Spinoza in the work of Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Heine. In chapters 6-11, Goetschel skillfully shows his previous interpretation of Spinoza's hermeneutic and political concerns at work in some of the most important aesthetic, critical, and political writings of the German Enlightenment. Mendelssohn's work, the *Philosophische Gespraechen* of 1755, explicitly names Spinoza and performs a vital critical, dialogical, interrogative approach to philosophy that evidence Mendelssohn's reading of Spinoza beginning in 1754. Grounded in his reading of the affects in Spinoza, Goetschel sees in Mendelssohn's *Ueber*

*die Empfindungen* (1755) not simply the attempt to bring the previously denigrated sensations to the fore as a valuable and important object for human contemplation. Mendelssohn takes up and deploys Spinoza's key concept of the affects as a critical continuation and new appropriation of Spinoza's teaching that the affects are not detached epiphenomena of individual subjectivity, but central to what constitutes the human being as well as the concerns of the state.

The chapter on "The Exchange of Tragedy" delivers a very useful reading of one of the most significant exchanges of the eighteenth century on the nature and function of the German *Trauerspiel*. This conversation/debate between Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Nicolai not only exemplifies some of the most interesting and compelling instances of dialogical interaction of the German *Aufklärung*, it reflects very well the ubiquitous and decisive presence of Spinozist thinking, if not Spinoza himself, on issues such as pity, the example, the relationship between imagination and reason, and the social and educative function of the tragedy in bringing the public to a higher awareness of themselves, other people, and their world. Here the aesthetic in the sense of perfected sensate cognition is as much a moral-ethical as a social-political concept that touches the very heart of what it meant to be human for these figures. Mendelssohn's argument that tragedy must stimulate and produce affects in the plural--no particular affect should be able to rule--and the plea for affectivity in general points to Spinoza's attempt to read the affective life of human being as constitutive rather than secondary or derivative. Similarly, in chapter 8, *Staking Out Grounds for Public Reason*, Goetschel shows how Mendelssohn forges an alternative concept of the political in *Jerusalem* that integrates both religiosity and the modern concept of *Bildung*.

Goetschel's reading of the Spinoza-Debate in chapter 11 identifies the defining difference of philosophical temperament and style between F.

H. Jacobi and Mendelssohn; whereas Jacobi is very much the either/or, accept or reject philosopher, demanding absolute consistency and rigid demonstration, Mendelssohn uses Spinoza as a set of interesting and imaginative ideas to be expanded upon and developed further in an ongoing conversation with his thought.

Chapters 12 through 16 are readings of Lessing's major critical, philosophical-religious, and dramatic works, not so much using Spinoza's philosophy as a springboard, but rather showing, in great detail, Lessing's ongoing engagement with Spinoza's philosophy and the spirit or manner of approaching philosophical problems. Lessing's *Die Juden* (1749, published in 1754) is a thinly veiled story of the exemplary Jew--Spinoza. Ironically, whereas Mendelssohn the "outsider" remained more conservative and orthodox in his approach, Lessing's work retains a polemical and critical, unorthodox edge that, by assuming ironic and quite nuanced positions, infuriated his opponents. Lessing's use of architectural imagery, examples, parables, and stories signals a departure from the fundamentalist metaphysics towards what Goetschel refers to as a "proto-pragmatist mode of thought" (p. 203). Goetschel's readings of Lessing's *Ernst und Falk*, *The Education of the Human Race*, and *Nathan der Weise* aptly demonstrate the strong presence of Spinoza in Lessing, the significance of Spinoza's critical procedure and polemical tone that inform Lessing's critical project. Goetschel's reading of the ring-parable in *Nathan* downplays the role of the parable, which forms the very center of the text. I have argued elsewhere that one cannot dismiss the importance of the parabolic and Lessing's powerful re-reading of the parable, the indirect and oblique speech-act that subtly points to a process of negotiated truth and, rather than providing a prescription for knowledge of the true, is itself a demonstration of the open-ended and ongoing, probative nature of interpretation.[2]

The remaining two chapters on Heine center on his *History of Philosophy and Religion in Germany*. Heine's demythologization and critique of German Philosophy focus on the "disturbance" that is Spinoza and the very suggestion of Spinoza's thought and the position that thought occupies in the history of this tradition. Spinoza is the repressed text/figure, a moment of counter-history that disrupts and questions the flow of linear historiography that Heine's "history" articulates. However, opposed to mere assimilation and appropriation, Heine invokes Spinoza as the "outsider," as that which cannot be subsumed into the traditional reading of tradition and therefore places question marks next to that history.

Willi Goetschel's book makes an outstanding contribution to the study of Spinoza's decisive influence on Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Heine through careful, thoughtful readings, historical understanding, and a keen sense of the tradition in which he is writing. My review would not be complete, however, without drawing attention to two questions I think his book leaves open. First, in its enthusiasm, *Spinoza's Modernity* emphasizes the "radical" and "innovative" status of Spinoza's thought, and sometimes makes it appear as though Spinoza and the "spinozists" of the German eighteenth and nineteenth centuries create a monism that is somehow more capable of absorbing the radical dichotomies, ruptures, and differences of modernity than other, more traditional theories of modernity. That "other" model of modernity, as I indicated at the outset, is never quite clearly defined or explicitly named. Presumably, those other purveyors of modernity could be and indeed have been subjected to equally subtle interpretations that show the much more nuanced ways of conceiving the project of modernity. There are other models of modernity, perhaps less discussed in the philosophical tradition but equally as important, that do not fall prey to the mechanistic, dualistic, and rigidly instrumental sense of rationality. Stephen Toulmin traced one such alternative in his book *Cosmopolis: The Hid-*

*den Agenda of Modernity*, in which he identifies another "modernity" where Montaigne, Rabelais, Erasmus and other humanists of the sixteenth century occupy the oppositional position of the local, the particular, the timely, and the contingent against the rigid scientism and abstract rationalism of the seventeenth century.[3] In my own work, the young Herder and the young Friedrich Schlegel both take on this radical critique of the metaphysics of modernity in favor of a hermeneutical-critical approach.[4] Equally important histories of the reception and appropriation of Spinoza in these two seminal writers still remain to be written.

Secondly, I sense an ambiguity in the book regarding Spinoza's position with regard to modernity itself. At times, *Spinoza's Modernity* makes it appear as though Spinoza and his advocates Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine are really proponents of the pragmatic, post-modern turn, which I read as dismissing the project of attempting to seek an ahistorical ground for a universal and unified sense of reason: Goetschel reads *intima essentia rei* as an anticipation of Peirce and proto-pragmatist ideas (p. 43); Lessing's use of architectural imagery "illustrates his move away from an ontology-based, substance metaphysics toward a proto-pragmatist mode of thought" (p. 203); Lessing's juxtaposition of two truth concepts "foreshadows the theme of pragmatism" (p. 239). Goetschel seems to camp Lessing with Rorty's ironist, nominalist, and historicist stance (p. 249). But I am not sure that Goetschel has clearly situated Spinoza and his German interpreters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with respect to the "unfinished project of modernity." In their belief in the critical project, indeed, in their reliance on Spinoza's gradualistic improvement of the understanding, Lessing and Mendelssohn still hold to the idea of progressive enlightenment. Does Spinoza's reappropriation in the German eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represent a different and more radical modernity (and, if so, different from what specific theories of modernity),

or do Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine actually pose a pragmatic, post-modern *overcoming* of the project of modernity? And, if Spinoza's project and his interpreters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Germany do perform such a preliminary overcoming, how does this alternative model escape from precisely the ethical and political difficulties of pragmatism as it is developed by Peirce, Dewey, James and, in our time, Rorty?

If enthusiasm to see the new and the uncharted here, and ambivalence, are the only and, I might say, provocative and interesting difficulties raised by this book, Willi Goetschel more than makes up for this with abundant care of reading, depth, and insight. To its credit, *Spinoza's Modernity* seeks to do much more than document another reception history; its fundamental interest is theoretical and philosophical rather than merely literary and historical. This book is a "must read" for anyone interested in modern German intellectual history. With insight, imagination, and erudition, it is a major contribution to our understanding of Spinoza's presence in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and how Spinoza's work served to mobilize a certain strand of critical modernity in Germany.

#### Notes

[1]. For the most recent and differential studies of the influence of Spinoza on the German eighteenth century, see Winfried Schroeder, *Spinoza in der deutschen Fruehaufklaerung* (Wuerzburg: Epistemata, 1987); Ruediger Otto, *Studien zur Spinozarezeption in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1994); and, Hanna Delf, Julius Schoeps, and Manfred Walther, eds., *Spinoza in der europaischen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Hentrich, 1994).

[2]. Goetschel states: "the parable proposes a didactic approach to truth, the ring story introduces a new understanding of truth that points beyond parabolic truth" (p. 243). What this reading misses, I think, is the new reading of the para-

bolic form itself which Lessing enacts in his text, his radical and provocative misreading of the purely didactic function of the classical parable. See Robert S. Leventhal, "The Parable as Performance: Interpretation, Cultural Transmission, and Political Strategy in Lessing's Nathan der Weise," *German Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (Fall 1988): pp. 502-528.

[3]. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[4]. Robert Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany, 1750-1800* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).

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