Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity
Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity

The Hidden Enlightenment of Diversity
from Spinoza to Freud

Michael Mack
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INTRODUCTION: SPINOZA’S ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY

Wasn’t all history full of the destruction of precious things?
Henry James, The Portrait of a Lady

This work is a study in religion, literature and cultural theory: it takes its terms
of reference from the seventeenth and late eighteenth century in the cultural
history of the Enlightenment, but has implications for understanding global
politics in the twenty-first century.

Contemporary issues are, however, not the main focus of this book. Neither
is this a study in the intellectual background of Spinoza, Herder, Goethe, George
Eliot, Rosenzweig and Freud. It engages with key intellectual texts not along
the methodological lines of either history or cultural theory but rather reads
them as forms of literature. The book is not, however, confined to the study of
literature. Neither is it of exclusively historical value. This is what I have in
mind when I combine intellectual history with cultural theory: I practice intel-
lectual history that is productive of contemporary thought but the main focus
is not the contemporary scene but a literary reading of “past” texts which bring
to the fore their present day relevance.

This hybrid methodological approach has important implication for a new
understanding of what Spinoza, and in a further intellectual shift of thought,
Herder criticizes as societal self-destruction. In related but different ways
Spinoza and Herder take issue with a form of self-preservation that is not sus-
tainable and thus turns out to be self-destructive. This concern with sustaina-
bility has become an urgent contemporary issue due to certain military, economic
and ecological crises which we confront in the present. Reading “past” texts in
the context of present-day concerns does not necessarily mean that history
transmutes into a work of fiction. On the contrary, it is the very “pastness” of
Spinoza’s, Herder’s, Goethe’s and George Eliot’s work that makes it relevant
for an engagement with present-day issues: it is distinct in its ethical message
from the self-destructive practices that shape much of our economical and
ecological current situation.

The historical texts discussed in this book have a contemporary relevance
precisely because they are not products of our age but are rather distinct from
it and in their distinction are thus capable of producing thought which is rele-
vant to rethinking the problems we are facing now.1 As a discussion of mainly
“past” thought this book does not manifest a new cultural theory in its own
right but it may contribute to twenty-first century thought—hence its tangen-
tial references to Derrida’s work on philosophy in times of terror.

1 For a brilliant discussion of this see Jeffrey Andrew Barash’s “Why remember the
Historical Past,” in Günter Fink (ed.) Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik,
Vol. 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) pp. 79–91 (p. 87).
The book draws new theoretical conclusions from a study of Spinoza’s legacy in the age of Goethe and beyond, largely transmitted through the writings of Herder. It develops a cultural theory based on that legacy. By legacy I mean the ways in which a person’s thought impacts on, rather than merely influences, contemporary thought. In the context of this project it describes how a line of writers and thinkers reconfigured Spinoza’s ideas and how these ideas thus became effective in society at large. The legacy of Spinoza is important because he was the first thinker to theorize narrative as the constitutive fabric of politics, identity, society, religion and the larger sphere of culture.

This book takes forward a novel approach toward the study of modern history and cultural theory as first developed in *German Idealism and the Jew*. That work focused on the problematic nature of Kant’s autonomy-heteronomy divide. While the Kantian position of an autonomous self is intrinsically liberating, his stark contrast between a free society and one enslaved to ‘the goods of this world’ has rather violent connotations and implications. Kant’s moral philosophy, however, has often come to serve as the foundation for a non-violent, and therefore rational, modern and postmodern sense of European identity. What has been overlooked in this context is Kant’s exclusion of societal manifestations that he associates with naturalistic contingency (African societies, Tahitians—whom he equates with cattle in his review of Herder’s *Ideas*, as will be discussed in Chapter 6—Jews, Orientals etc.).

For writers who critically confronted this demotion of naturalistic contingency and embodied life (as analyzed in *German Idealism and the Jew*), however, Spinoza’s anti-teleological thought became an inspiration for their literary revision of Kant’s idealism. The book takes forward the analysis developed in *German Idealism and the Jew* by discussing Spinoza’s writings on politics and ethics as an alternative to a Kantian conception of modernity. Spinoza provides the intellectual and historical common ground where the more private

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2 Related to this divide between rational or free and irrational or naturalistic communities is Kant’s concern with humanity’s assumed division into superior and inferior races. Scholars (Robert Bernasconi, among others) have recently shown how Kant was the first to legitimate racism on scientific grounds. (This topic will be discussed in Chapter 7) As John Gray has put it: “It was Immanuel Kant—after Voltaire the supreme Enlightenment figure and, unlike Voltaire, a great philosopher—who more than any other thinker gave intellectual legitimacy to the concept of race. Kant was in the forefront of the science of anthropology that was emerging in Europe and maintained that there are innate differences between the races. While he judged whites to have all the attributes required for progress towards perfection, he represents Africans as being predisposed to slavery, observing in his *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), ‘The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling.’” Gray, *Black Mass. Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 61.
Introduction: Spinoza’s Alternative Modernity

realm of literature and the public sphere of the political can meet and interact with each other. Spinozist writing and thought seems to confound binary oppositions, such as the one between private and public.

Here opposites are not fundamental. They do not oppose each other but are complementary to each other. Spinoza’s legacy seems to be a ghostly one: it opens up a space where apparently incompatible entities visit each other as if one were haunting the other. The specter whom Marx conjured up in his Communist Manifesto (1848) had already made an appearance in the hugely influential On the Doctrine of Spinoza (Über die Lehre des Spinoza) with which Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi provoked the Spinoza controversy in 1785. Jacobi makes clear that he endeavors to put an end to the haunting with which Spinoza’s ghost seems to keep Germany enthralled.

What is crucial here is that the haunting in question does its work by confounding clearly defined forms. Revisiting Marx’s Specter of 1848, Derrida has recently argued that ghostliness disturbs and disrupts the presence of an identity that purports to be identical to itself. A specter performs this rupture so that one cannot be sure whether its disappearance is not at the same time its appearance: “a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back.”3 Jacobi attempts to turn the indefinable specter of Spinoza into the clearly definable doctrine of Spinoza. What makes him so uneasy about the absence of definition is that it gives rise to undecidability. It is difficult to decide against someone whose image has not been clearly depicted with definite and recognizable features. Jacobi sets out to clarify matters by pinpointing the exact structure and shape of Spinoza’s teaching so that it can be opposed.

According to Jacobi only the delineation of a stable form would be capable of preventing the visitation of the ghost Spinoza. “It would be of great use to publically represent the doctrine of Spinoza in its true shape [Gestalt] and according to its necessary connections” writes Jacobi.4 What follows concerns the absence of shape or the confounding of clearly defined entities—in other words, the haunting exerted by the ghost Spinoza:

A spectre [Gespenst] has recently been haunting Germany in various shapes (I wrote to Moses Mendelssohn) and it is held by the superstitious and by the atheists in equal reverence . . . Perhaps we will witness some day that an argument will arise over the corpse of Spinoza equal to the one which arose between the archangels and Satan over the corpse of Moses . . . [bold in the German original].5

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5 Jacobi, Über die Lehre des Spinoza, p. 168.
Jacobi composes and publishes the writings gathered together in *On the Doctrine of Spinoza* in order to exorcise the persistent impact of a figure that appears to be an anti-Moses of sorts. Whereas the archangels and Satan’s argument over the corpse of Moses concerned a clearly defined doctrine, the impending one over the corpse of Spinoza is malicious, because no one can be sure what it is actually about. Significantly, an early eighteenth-century German translation of Johannes Colerus’ *Spinoza* biography associates the Spinozist God with the deleterious impact of a ghost. It may well be that Jacobi enlarges this association of Spinoza’s alleged atheism with the haunting of a malicious specter: “If one considers, however, his opinions one concludes that the god of Spinoza is nothing but a fictive Ghost, an imagined god, who is the opposite of God.”6 Countering such deleterious influences, Jacobi endeavors to deprive the corpse of Spinoza of its confounding and haunting power. He does so by giving a clearly defined shape to what Spinoza represents (*Gestalt*). Jacobi constructs Spinoza’s *Gestalt* (shape or form) in order to banish Spinoza’s *Gespenst* (Specter).

The present book shows how unsuccessful Jacobi’s attempt was. Far from having put an end to Spinoza’s legacy, Jacobi in fact provoked a controversy that hugely increased the appreciation of the writing, life and thought of the Dutch Jewish philosopher within the public sphere of the late eighteenth century. Indeed Spinoza became the representative for an alternative modernity that differed from the categorical and hierarchical components of Kant’s modern moral and political philosophy.

Rather than whole-heartedly embracing the Kantian project of modernity, writers and thinkers in the age of Goethe put Spinoza’s concept of self-preservation to creative use by highlighting the self-destruction implicit in the modern quest for unlimited power. Having Spinoza’s *conatus* (self-preservation) as their point of intellectual orientation writers and thinkers in the age of Goethe discussed in different but related ways how the emerging increase in human power was accompanied by an erosion of limits toward human self-destruction. They criticized precisely this self-destructive element in a teleological and deterministic narrative of history that demoted the past and cast non-European “primitive” societies as morally debauched and epistemologically retarded.

Spinoza’s vision of a non-hierarchical modernity together with its various creative inflections and revisions in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century has particular significance for contemporary political philosophy and cultural theory. The broad findings of the study center on the way in which Spinoza has endured as a major, if not to say, the major inspiration of visions of modernity that are nonexclusive—or, in other words nonideological—and non-hierarchical. The center of analysis is the contemporary relevance of Herder’s thought and the creative rereading of Herder’s Spinozist historiography in the work of his tutee Goethe as well as in Eliot’s proto-Zionist novel

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Daniel Deronda. Herder’s “invention” of the concept culture is a creative development of Spinoza’s notion of self-preservation (*conatus*).

The book establishes the contemporary relevance of Herder’s Spinoza-inspired critique of Kantian teleology in the study of both nature and history. Rather than discuss Herder as a reader of various writers and thinkers (as is commonly done in German influence studies) this study establishes Herder as a philosopher who is capable of enjoying a remarkable contemporary relevance. His relevance consists in his divergence from the standard Enlightenment conception of history as unilateral progress and his reinterpretation of history as diverse. In this account history does not find its fulfillment in a single goal (as is argued in teleological thought).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Spinoza was infamous for having pulled down the hierarchical divide between the realms of the transcendent (God and the mind) and the immanent (Nature and the body). Goethe and his former mentor Herder set out to adapt this Spinozist undertaking to the changed life world of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. They took issue with some tendencies in Enlightenment thought which condemned the historical past to insignificance. A new reading of Herder’s writing and thought contributes to an understanding of temporality as a non-hierarchical, gradual development of diversity out of and within a common substance of interconnectedness and interdependence.

This discussion is important because it offers a way out of the self-destructive social set up that drives much of contemporary global policies. The new cultural theory that informs my approach toward the study of modernity is a timely response to what has recently been characterized, in the philosophical analysis of both Islamic fundamentalism and “the war on terror,” as autoimmunity or the self-destruction of our contemporary global society. Jacques Derrida in an interview with Giovanna Borradori characterized autoimmune processes as “the strange behaviour where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection” and they thus invariably refer back to their opposite: to the Spinozist theory of self-preservation. These self-destructive processes result from triumphal declarations of moral, epistemological, military and religious superiority of one societal formation over the one which functions as its “enemy.” Here clearly the spheres of religion and politics meet in a rather disturbing manner.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Nancy Levene’s assessment of Spinoza’s oneness with the biblical conception of God, she may have a point in

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emphasizing the validity of a Spinozist contribution to the study of religion.\textsuperscript{9} The present book, however, does not only discuss Spinoza (as well as thought inspired by Spinoza) in the context of religious studies because it has a much wider reach. In addition to religious studies, it engages with the disciplines of literature, philosophy, history as well as with the political and social sciences.

It is worth emphasizing that Spinoza refuses secular radicalism because he values those aspects that in different forms of religion give rise to ethical actions. This brings us to one of the main wagers of this book; Spinoza introduces a non-hierarchical vision into the conception of modernity. Spinoza does not privilege one religion over another or one ethical system over another, because one of his main endeavors is to do away with privilege and other forms of hierarchical rankings—be it between reason and revelation or between different ethnic and/or religious groups. As Levene has put it,

unlike many of Spinoza’s medieval precursors, for whom reason and revelation were hierarchically related, and unlike many of his contemporaries, for whom reason and revelation agreed in all important respects except for the supernatural claims of the latter (to which reason gives uniformed but deferential assent), Spinoza attempted to put the perennial question on a footing which leaves both sovereign.\textsuperscript{10}

Contrary to his geometrical method, the content of Spinoza’s thought is filled with uncertainty. He argues for the coexistence of different ways of life. The historical context in which Spinoza developed his thought is clearly pertinent for a better understanding of his skepticism toward certainty in political life. He was born into a confused cultural set up. He was a Jew of Marrano origin. The situation of the Marranos was far from being “certain” in that it “favored doubt of Christianity quite as much as doubt of Judaism.”\textsuperscript{11} It was “disposed to alienation from all revealed religion.”\textsuperscript{12} Within the wider sphere of Amsterdam politics Spinoza encountered the uncertain power struggle between orthodox Calvinist and \textit{Remonstrants}.\textsuperscript{13} Even though he clearly sided with the egalitarianism of the \textit{Remonstrants}, Spinoza did not attempt to overcome a state of epistemological, religious and political uncertainty.

It seems an egalitarian approach allows for a certain amount of ambiguity. Indeed, Spinoza makes the limitations of human knowledge the basis of his thought: he focuses on the discrepancy between empirical reality and our conception of it. He argues for the indistinguishable unity of body and mind so

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Levene, \textit{Spinoza’s Revelation}, p. 234.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Strauss, \textit{Spinoza’s Critique of Religion}, translated by E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} For a brilliant discussion of the wider political context see Etienne Balibar’s \textit{Spinoza and Politics}, translated by Peter Snowdown (London: Verso, 1998), 16–31.
\end{itemize}
that bodily distractions emerge not as the opponent of thinking but as its proper core. In this way uncertainty encapsulates philosophical inquiry. Spinoza blurs the distinction between conceptual boundaries: the corporeal is not the imperfect, because there is no such thing as imperfection. We are all equally imperfect or, rather, perfect.\textsuperscript{14} Spinoza radically breaks down the hierarchical divide between those who succeed and those who seem to fail. Warren Montag refers to this conscious espousal of ambiguity when he interprets Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} as follows:

\begin{quote}
The idea of a God or nature which does not in any way pre-exist its own realization (E I, Prop. 33, scholium 2) forces us to reject the notion of imperfection: “By reality and perfection I mean the same thing.” The notion of final causes, like that of free will, however, is no less real for being false.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Part of Spinoza’s critique of final causes, and teleology in general, is his critique of an anthropomorphic conception of God. Here he confirms the gap between humanity and divinity; not, however, to uphold a hierarchical conception of God but in order to upend attempts by specific religious groups to claim quasi-divine authority in their struggle for economic and military power against other social formations.

\textbf{II}

Spinoza’s rational inquiry is concerned with the avoidance of violence. He analyzes the ways in which anthropomorphic conceptions of God further violent forms of social interaction. This book discusses the long life of the Spinozist critique of anthropomorphism. The critique of anthropomorphism emerges as a political theology that has abandoned the institution of sovereignty. It is this theological and political engagement that gives rise to a Spinozist conception of modernity. It is an alternative to the dualist notion of modern rationalism as propounded by Descartes and Kant.

Spinoza was of course to some extent a Cartesian.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly Spinoza and Kant’s respective projects share many features. Both are rationalists and universalists. They arrive, however, at their respective conceptions of both reason and universalism rather differently. Pauline Phemister has justifiably argued that “Spinoza often opposes Descartes while Leibniz, in opposition to both, nevertheless forges a path midway between the two, melding truths from each

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} For a brilliant discussion of this point see Montag’s \textit{Louis Althusser} (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 53.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Montag, \textit{Bodies, Masses, Power. Spinoza and his Contemporaries} (London: Verso, 1999), 40.
\item \textsuperscript{16} For detailed discussion of Descartes’ influence on Spinoza see Tammy Nyden-Bullock’s \textit{Spinoza’s Radical Cartesian Mind} (London: Continuum, 2007).
\end{itemize}
into a new theory.” Crucially—and in striking contrast to Descartes—there is lack of binary oppositions in Spinoza’s formulation of a radical Enlightenment. He does not play off the mind against the body, nor does he oppose the particular with the universal. While Spinoza has a strong commitment to rationalism in common with Descartes, Hobbes and Kant, his version of reason is more inclusive of what is considered lowly, bodily or even irrational than any other philosopher in the rationalist tradition.

There is another important difference between the modernity shaped by Kant’s moral philosophy and Spinoza’s modern ethology. It is a difference, which Constantin Brunner has analyzed in his 1909 introduction to K. O. Meinsma’s *Spinoza and his Circle*. Brunner argues that Kant’s rationalism has ironically fallen prey to what Spinoza criticizes as superstition and anthropomorphism. How can we account for a superstitious Kant? Brunner pinpoints Kant’s superstition in his belief in progress (*Entwicklungsglaube*). He traces the way how “the transformation of superstition out of religion emerges in the doctrine of progress as part of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy.” The central part of this book (Chapters 3 to 7) analyzes Herder’s important critique of Kant’s doctrine of progress.

We may justifiably describe Herder as the inventor of the concept “culture”. This study offers the first analysis of how Herder’s notion of culture is a creative development of Spinoza’s *conatus*. Spinoza’s *conatus* describes the ways in which the particular participates in the universal: by preserving oneself one contributes to the preservation of the entire universe of which we all are an infinitesimal part. This book articulates a line of thought which has often been silenced in standard accounts of modernity: that of an inclusive rather than exclusive universalism—one that does not condemn the particular and one that does not oppose it to the universal but rather makes the two dependent on each other.

This book focuses on Spinoza’s rupture with the metaphysics of God or nature and Herder’s shift away from Cartesian and Kantian categories of the cogito. The rupture and shifts introduced by Herder and Spinoza revolve around a doubling of thought where we first radically separate entities that have become conflated with each other—this is precisely what Spinoza does when he says that we superimpose our conception of nature or God onto nature and God; thus distorting truth while proclaiming to have found “the truth.” In the second doubling movement of thought this separation performs unity. We are part of God or nature precisely because we are aware of being separate from it. This awareness of separation makes us realize that we are part of that from which we are separated. We are a part of nature but just

that: only a part and not the whole and hence we are not able to comprehend the whole of which we are a part.

Franz Rosenzweig calls this principle of holistic separation Spinoza’s paganism. The chapter following the discussion of Herder’s Spinozist account of reason introduces the reader to Goethe’s related critique of an exclusive type of rationality which understands itself as being separated from and opposed to the “primitive,” “uncivilized,” “merely natural and thus irrational.” Rosenzweig defines paganism in terms of Spinoza’s abandonment of categories. Notional thought is prone to fall prey to anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphic conceptions of God enact the distortion of categories in its most glaring form as they conflate human deficient logic with the logic of being. The logic of being, however, is nature as it exists undisturbed by the partiality of limited human thought. According to Rosenzweig paganism is Spinozism: both distinguish between thought and being while nevertheless not opposing one against the other.

Rosenzweig establishes an intriguing link between the new thinking of phenomenology and Spinoza’s retreat from traditional metaphysical thought that remains mired to the fixity and timelessness as encapsulated by the term essence. According to Rosenzweig Spinoza inaugurated a revolution within metaphysics. This may sound strange, because Spinoza is often seen as a disciple of Descartes. Yet Spinoza’s discussion of the anthropomorphic conception of God in traditional theological and philosophical discourse introduces not only a shift within but also, more radically, a break from traditional metaphysics. What makes his thought so radical is the fact that it instantiates the crucial phenomenological differentiation between our limited human categories and the being of nature or God. Within traditional metaphysics the categories are meant to grasp the true existence of world. According to Spinoza, and Herder afterwards, we are, however, never fully able to fathom the laws of the cosmos. If we presume to do so we have already fallen prey to anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism.

Our inability to grasp nature’s complete set of laws does not mean that we are incapable of reaching an adequate view of our limited world. This is precisely what George Eliot sets out to do in her Spinozist characterization of literary realism as the performance of an inclusive universalism. Chapter 8 discusses the ways in which Eliot presents a critique of ideology in *Daniel Deronda* when she argues for the Spinozist right of a universal particularism. In related but different ways Eliot, Herder, Rosenzweig and Goethe conceive of reason in narrative terms. The writers and thinkers discussed in this study further develop Spinoza’s shift away from the nonnarrative and static toward

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19 For a study of Spinoza’s influence on George Eliot see Dorothy Atkins’ *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1978). Arkins, however, depicts Spinoza in light that contradicts recent assessments of his non-hostile approach to the emotions (Moira Gatens, Genevieve Lloyd and Damasio’s recent studies, for example).
the complementary and diverse. Mental awareness that goes so far as to be mindful of the mind prepares an alternative conception of modernity and rationality. The concluding chapter to this book connects with the opening chapter by discussing the ways in which Spinoza and Freud are rationalists with a difference. It is so far an unarticulated conception of another modernity and rationality that the following study attempts to uncover. As has been intimated above, the uncovering in question is not only historical. The conclusions of the study do not lose their intellectual significance and impact within the context of the late nineteenth century. The work of historical exegesis does not confine itself to the rather closed sphere of philological influence study. By unearthing and delineating the blueprint of a truly universalist Enlightenment this book also unfolds a novel social and cultural theory.
Chapter 1

Descartes, Spinoza or the Goal that Destroys Itself

No philosopher of the seventeenth century has acquired more literary buzz in the twenty-first century than Benedict de Spinoza, who lived from 1632 to 1677.
Don Garett, Times Literary Supplement 19 October 2007

1. Introduction: Spinoza and the Critique of Hierarchy

Why did Spinoza prove to be such a vital source of inspiration for both the romantic approach toward diversity and for the contemporary philosophical discussion about politics and ethics? This chapter will delineate the ways in which Spinoza’s philosophy offers a novel conception of what it means to be enlightened at precisely those points where it diverges from Descartes’ conception of rationality. Chapter 2 will then discuss how Spinoza’s notion of self-preservation (the conatus) encloses in itself a blueprint of a cooperative vision of society. The possible ramifications of this vision are the subject of the discussion in the chapters that follow chapter 2. They will mainly focus on how Herder creatively reconfigured Spinozist philosophy in his critique of goal-oriented conceptualizations (i.e. teleologies) of history as well as in his various controversies with what he thought to be monolithic formations within the eighteenth-century enlightenment. This chapter offers an introduction to the ways in which Spinoza’ Ethics lays the foundation for various visions of a type

1 Spinoza’s reading of Descartes’ is a complex topic of research. Genevieve Lloyd has ingeniously analyzed how Spinoza calls into question the connections established by Descartes’ in particular, and the philosophic tradition in general, “between individuality and the concept of substance.” Lloyd, Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza’s Ethics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 10. Lloyd argues that Spinoza diverges from Descartes by paradoxically pushing Cartesian thought to an extreme point where it is no longer Cartesian. In this way Spinoza undermines Descartes’s distinction between will and intellect by widening the cracks which have already developed as part of the traditional philosophical concept of autonomy: “But there are for Descartes restraints on this power of autonomous choice; and Spinoza exploits them to collapse the Cartesian distinction between will and intellect into his own doctrine that the power of the mind resides in understanding only—an understanding that is itself subject to the necessities that govern the rest of nature. In the lack of accompanying will, however, understanding does not remain a bare cognitive state. It becomes conative, though not in a way that could be summed up in Descartes’s idea of the will as wishing or shunning, seeking or avoiding. The essence of Spinoza’s conative understanding becomes not choice but acquiescence. And this is at the center of his difference with Descartes.” Lloyd, Part of Nature, p. 62.
of enlightenment that rather than rejecting, embraces cultural diversity and the plurality of the material viz. embodied world.

Does the ethology which Spinoza advanced in his *Ethics* have singular significance for the formulation of a viable contemporary social theory? Spinoza’s presence can be found in the thought of divergent twentieth- and twenty-first century thinkers. Spinoza’s thought seems to exert a peculiar sense of contemporaneousness.

This is not to claim that Spinoza anticipated the social problems that haunt our seemingly inclusive global society. Instead of dislocating Spinoza’s thought from his particular historical setting, this chapter analyzes how his *Ethics* delineate the project of a kind of modernity that offers an alternative to the current Kantian approach toward defining the modern. Within the latter part of the eighteenth century—under the immense influence of Kant’s transcendental philosophy—history came to represent modernity: the future of humanity seemed to promise its immanent perfectibility. In my recent book *German Idealism and the Jew. The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* I have shown how these attempts at constructing a “perfect” otherworldly world within this one were premised on the exclusion of worldly imperfections. Judaism and the Jews represented these bodily remainders of contingency as well as political and ethical deficiency; it was thought that with the progress of history, worldly imperfections would vanish from the world just as Jews and Judaism would cease to exist in the perfect modern state of the future.

2 The term “ethology” describes the broad reach of Spinoza’s *Ethics* which is not concerned with a narrow conception of the ethical but includes the political, medical, and the larger sphere of culture. Genevieve Lloyds has intriguingly argued that Deleuze’s term “ethology” emerges from a political reading of the *Ethics* as a work which is closely related to the *Theological-Political Treatise*: “Whether or not we accept Deleuze’s direct political explanation of the interruption, the insertion of the *Theological-Political Treatise* into the chronology of the writing of the *Ethics* should alert us to the importance for Spinoza of the relations between the metaphysical, the ethical, and the political.” Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 26.


For writers who critically confronted this demotion of naturalistic contingency and embodied life, Spinoza’s union of mind and body became an inspiration for their literary revision of Kant’s idealism.

This chapter implicitly discusses Spinoza’s writings on politics and ethics as an alternative to the Cartesian legacy within a predominantly Kantian conception of modernity. Spinoza upends the hierarchical dualism between mind and body that prepares the ground for the construction of Kant’s moral philosophy. As Stuart Hampshire has put it: “The union of mind and body is so close because the mind monitors changes in the body, and the brain is both the instrument and the object of the monitoring.”5 There is a non-hierarchical relationship between mind, brain and body so that neither “is more fundamental than the other.”6 This chapter focuses on the ways in which Spinoza overturns fundamental oppositions and makes them complementary until we reach a reach state of the coexistence of the diverse.7 It analyzes how Spinoza’s Ethics delineates the blueprint for a non-hierarchical and nonexclusive understanding of human sociability. Accordingly, it takes issue with a recent trend in scholarly literature that attributes a hierarchical framework to Spinoza’s understanding of ethics.8 Recently, Steven B. Smith has thus argued that the Ethics radicalizes Descartes’ divide between the biological viz. natural realm of the body and the intellectual sphere of the mind.

There is some scholarly disagreement as to how radical the divide was that Descartes established between mind and body. Susan James has taken some critics to task who overemphasize the divisiveness of this divide: “By treating The Meditations on First Philosophy as Descartes’s philosophical treatment, scholars have created a one-sided interpretation of Cartesianism in which the division between body and soul is overemphasized and sometimes misunderstood.”9

6 Ibid., p. lii.
7 In this respect my argument further develops and radicalizes Genevieve Lloyd’s discussion of Spinoza’s philosophy as outdoing the false opposition between the individualistic and the communitarian. Lloyd has ingeniously analyzed the way in which Spinoza’s notion of the self includes that of the other and thus offers a striking contrast to the philosophical tradition: “The self evoked in Epicurus’s discussion of death is an all-or-nothing affair—solidly there during life, totally absent at death. For Spinoza, in contrast, the mind’s self-awareness during life involves, as we have already seen, a blurring of the boundaries between its own body and that of the others that impinge on it. To the extent that a mind comes to an adequate understanding of itself as an individual—that is, of the essence of the body of which it is the idea—it must understand other things together with itself.” Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 120.
thought underwent significant changes throughout his life, Descartes did “at no stage” abandon the belief “that human perceptual cognition, still less human behavior, could be explained fully without reference to an immaterial intelligence.” Gaukroger astutely historicizes Descartes’ emphasis on the immaterial and, associated with it, his highly ambivalent attitude to embodied life. He traces Descartes’ mind-body divide to the Christian religious renewal of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that attempted to recuperate qualities which it associated with the origins of Christianity: “hatred of the body and the world, the pervasiveness of sin, and a sharp sense of the fleetingness of time.” John Cottingham has certainly abstained from overemphasizing Descartes’s divide between body and mind, but he none the less acknowledges Spinoza’s striking departure from a Cartesian mind-body dualism:

> When Spinoza himself speaks of the mind and body as being “united”, or of their “union”, he emphatically rejects the Cartesian idea of union as an intermingling or joining together; what is meant, rather, is that mind and body are *unum et idem*, one and the same.13

Recently Steven Nadler has confirmed this crucial difference between Descartes’ and Spinoza’s philosophy in relation to their respective writings about mind and body: “For Spinoza, there is a fundamental identity between mind and body—and thus a fundamental unity to the human being—that goes much deeper than any difference there may be between them.” According to Smith, however, Spinoza seems to emphasize the difference rather than the unity between the corporal and the cerebral.15

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11 Ibid., p. 25.
13 Ibid., p. 132.
15 Smith claims that Spinoza’s critique of teleology devalues nature in order to celebrate human goals as the pinnacle of moral achievement. Here nature represents the immorality of the corporeal which Smith opposes to the morality of humanity’s cerebral life: “The belief in divine teleology, we have seen, is a prejudice that is itself explained by the tendency to attribute to nature or God the same kinds of purposes that we have as human beings. We are, Spinoza appears to say, teleological beings and we cannot help fancifully ascribing similar ends to other objects in nature and history.” Smith, *Spinoza’s Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 53. Smith ignores that what he is describing is precisely the object of Spinoza’s critique: Spinoza certainly does not approve of ascribing human purposes to either God or nature. On the contrary he unmasks such ascriptions as deluded, anthropomorphic fantasies. Spinoza is far from endorsing a “we cannot help” approach which Smith seems to be advocating here.