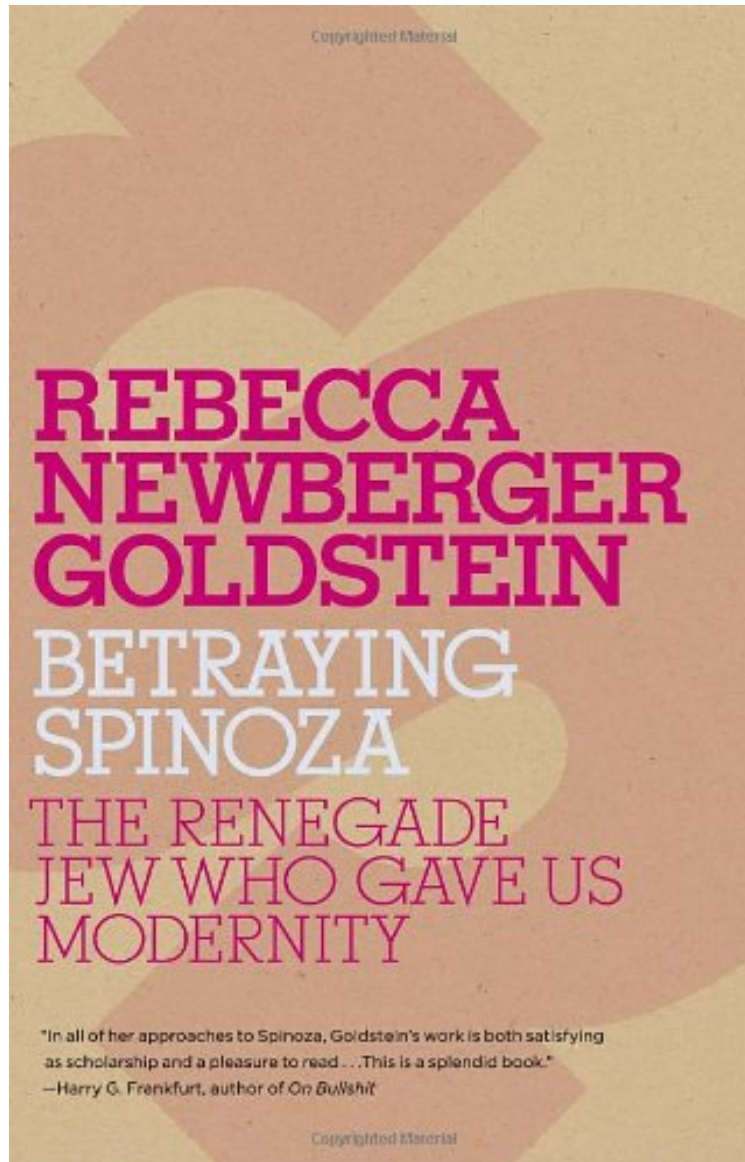


[Read free] Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity (Jewish Encounters Series)

## Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity (Jewish Encounters Series)

Rebecca Goldstein

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#472985 in Books Rebecca Goldstein 2009-08-11 2009-08-11 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.00 x .80 x 5.20l, .70 #File Name: 0805211594306 pages Betraying Spinoza The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity | File size: 29.Mb

Rebecca Goldstein : Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity (Jewish Encounters Series) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity (Jewish Encounters Series):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Entertains, informs and provokes  
By The Fox  
Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is an engaging writer. She entertains, she informs, and she provokes. In this most valuable book she brings Spinoza to life through an examination of his roots, his writings, his life and his times. In the process she displays her qualities as a teacher. We learn about Sephardim history, mid 17th century Amsterdam, opinionated remarks of a teacher from her orthodox education, and much more. Ever a philosopher we learn essential content of Spinoza's 'Ethics', Logical Positivism, Kabbalah--you name it-- and poses significant questions, such as the existential question: "What defines a Jew?". In the end she betrays Spinoza only in the sense that in contradiction to his abstracting himself from his teachings, she shows that his ideas are in part a product of his background and experience. It is a book deserving of a re-reading.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A glorious betrayal  
By Rav Baruch  
I have enjoyed many of Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's novels and essays. This book is exceptionally good, providing a personal and communal entry into Spinoza's world (that is the betrayal) with an easy presentation of some of Spinoza's philosophy. The play, "New Jerusalem" just closed in Toronto. It also situated Spinoza in the political and religious anxiety of the post-Expulsion Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful. "The world is everything that is the case."  
By Gio  
My review title is not from Spinoza. It's the first and most fundamental 'proposition' of the "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus" by the 20th C philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a book obviously intended as a late response to Spinoza's "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus". The 'early' Wittgenstein was unquestionably influenced by Spinoza, but then, who wasn't? Wittgenstein continues: "The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts. For the totality of facts determines both what is the case, and also all that is not the case. The facts in logical space are the world." Spinoza would, I think, be impressed. Here's the opening proposition of Spinoza's "Ethics": "By that which is self-caused (causa sui) I mean that of which the essence involves existence, or that of which the nature is only conceivable as existent." Causa sui! It is what it is! That which exists is what amounts to 'God'. (I might as well confess that I find Spinoza's 'God' an unnecessary semantic illusion, of the sort that Wittgenstein would rail against.) But for Spinoza, it was the convenient and comfortable: deus sive natura.

Rebecca Goldstein explicates thus: "Reality is determined by divine necessity in the stringest sense possible, since the necessity IS the divinity. What reality IS is the one and only system of necessary connections. That is the CAUSA SUI, the thing that explains itself, outside of which nothing can be conceived. It is logic itself, not its rules but its applications -- the vast and infinite system of logical entailments that are not merely abstract, as we usually conceive of them, but rather coated with the substance of being. Reality is ontologically enriched logic." Hmm. Does that clarify things? Or do more words just complicate the insight? In fact, to my mind, Goldstein does a superb job of explicating Spinoza, though she needs several chapters of her book to do so. And there's no philosopher in European history whose thoughts are more important than Spinoza, so if you can grapple with him merely by reading this one 250-page book, you will surely be wise to read it.

Earlier in her text, Goldstein discusses a general philosophical issue: the IF SHOULD BE progression. Spinoza, she claims, denies and dismisses the gap between IF and IS. (And so far, both Wittgenstein and I would modestly agree.) Spinoza's 'error', according to Goldstein, is his presumption that logic can carry the progression from IS to SHOULD BE. (Once again, Ludwig and I concur.) But oh my, dear reader! I shan't spoil the suspense for you by attempting to explain any of this. You'll have to read the book! And trust me, it's well worth reading!

In what sense does Rebecca Goldstein BETRAY Spinoza? Not in her analysis of his thoughts, for sure. She does him conscientious justice as an exegete. Her 'betrayal' is in personalizing the philosopher, in attempting to find the 'personality' behind the logic, the biographical and social context of Spinoza's rigorously impersonal philosophy. And she 'betrays' him where it hurts; she attempts to identify the Jewish roots of Spinoza's mentality, that is, the habits and predispositions of thought which Spinoza 'inherited' with his Sephardic Jewish identity. Spinoza, as most people know, was expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, but never aligned himself with the Christian or any other religion community in lieu of Jewry. He was arguably the first prominent 'secular' thinker of European history, and his secularism earned him fervid antagonism and ostracism. He was, and still is, reviled as an 'atheist.'

Goldstein's examination of Spinoza's Jewish heritage and of his life experience constitutes a 'betrayal' of Spinoza's proud assertion that his ideas were universal, independent of any personal context.

Goldstein is a highly digressive writer. A 'parenthetical' stylist. I have disliked her novels intensely, but I enjoyed every paragraph of "Betraying Spinoza", even when the paragraphs gave me the impression that she'd scattered them down a stair case and then picked them up at random. More than half the text of this book is not specifically concerned with Spinoza or his philosophy, but rather with the history of Jewry and Judaism, especially of the Sephardic Jews who fled from Portugal and Spain to The Netherlands in the 17th C. I suspect that many readers will be more interested in Goldstein's history 'lessons' than in her exegesis of Spinoza. The history of the Sephardic diaspora is central to the history of the 17th C, to the amazing successes of the Dutch 'Golden Age', and eventually also to the whole course of history of Europe and the 'Middle East' over the centuries since.

Oh really, you say? Well, here's an example. In the Turkish Empire, in Istanbul, during Spinoza's lifetime, a Jew named Zevi Sabbatai announced that he was himself the long-awaited Messiah. Sabbatai was not an isolated figure; he stood in a tradition of Kabbalistic (Lurianic) thinkers derived from Sephardic Iberia. His claims were taken seriously as far away as Amsterdam; huge sums of money were committed to his 'cause' and huge expectations of the Millennium were excited. Spinoza was surely aware of the excitement, which

he would have scorned as mere superstition. His chief correspondent and supporter in England was a man named Heinrich Oldenburg. At one point, Oldenburg wrote to Spinoza, asking about Sabbatai: "Here there is a wide-spread rumor that the Israelites, who have been dispersed for more than two thousand years, are to return to their homeland. Few herabout believe it, but many wish it... I am anxious to know what the Jews of Amsterdam have heard of it, and how they are affected by so momentous an announcement, which, if it is true, is likely to bring about a world crisis." A world crisis? As predicted by an obscure Englishman to a secular Jew in the 17th C? Spinoza was, of course, also an ethical philosopher, or rather a philosopher of ethics. Though Goldstein dismisses Spinoza's logical assertions of ethical principles, it's interesting to note that she (and I) conscientiously live by them. According to Spinoza, the ethical objective is to live happily. But Spinoza dismisses the sorts of happiness gained from hedonism, wealth, or romantic love, asserting that the most reliable and total source of happiness is intellectual, based on the measure of understanding a finite being like himself, or you or me, can achieve of the infinity of existence. And since we are ineluctably finite, and cannot hope to approach infinity, we need ethically to make the most of our finity, that is, of Life, and think as little as possible about Death, which is mere uninteresting Nothingness. Okay, Baruch! I'm cool with that. One more quick observation: Spinoza's assertion that the totality of existence, i.e. Nature, is the same thing as God might easily be perverted into the sort of balderdash known as "Intelligent Design." Spinoza, i think, would have scoffed; "the Design IS the Intelligence," he might have cried out. Spinoza was not a pantheist, not one who perceived God as immanent in Nature. His 'God' has no nature independent of Nature. His 'God' was not Aristotle's First Cause. The inherent weakness of Spinoza's logic, in the hindsight of 300 years of scientific learning, was its presumption of a constant state of being, of a stable universe. Spinoza lacked all the insights of "evolution". In fact, his 'existence' was timeless; he had no explanation of Time to offer. A 'timeless universe' does indeed look more like 'God' than an evolutionary one. By attempting to exclude 'contingency' from his infinite web of logic, Spinoza locked himself in pre-scientific metaphysics. But ... "If we see farther than Spinoza, it's because we stand on his shoulders."

Part of the Jewish Encounter series In 1656, Amsterdams Jewish community excommunicated Baruch Spinoza, and, at the age of twentythree, he became the most famous heretic in Judaism. He was already germinating a secularist challenge to religion that would be as radical as it was original. He went on to produce one of the most ambitious systems in the history of Western philosophy, so ahead of its time that scientists today, from string theorists to neurobiologists, count themselves among Spinozas progeny. In *Betraying Spinoza*, Rebecca Goldstein sets out to rediscover the flesh-and-blood man often hidden beneath the veneer of rigorous rationality, and to crack the mystery of the breach between the philosopher and his Jewish past. Goldstein argues that the trauma of the Inquisition's persecution of its forced Jewish converts plays itself out in Spinozas philosophy. The excommunicated Spinoza, no less than his excommunicators, was responding to Europe's first experiment with racial anti-Semitism. Here is a Spinoza both hauntingly emblematic and deeply human, both heretic and heroa surprisingly contemporary figure ripe for our own uncertain age. From the Hardcover edition.

From Publishers Weekly This biography of 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) may seem out of place in the Jewish Encounters series, devoted to Jewish thinkers and themes, because Spinoza denied the importance of Jewish identity, and Amsterdam's Jewish community expelled him for heresy. But Goldstein, author of *The Mind-Body Problem* and *Incompleteness* and a professor of philosophy, reconstructs Spinoza's life and traces his metaphysics to his efforts to solve the dilemmas of Jewish identity. The philosopher grew up in a community of Jews who had fled the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. As Goldstein argues, Spinoza's "determination to think through his community's tragedy in the most universal terms possible compelled him to devise a unique life for himself, insisting on secularism when the concept of it had not yet been conceived." For Spinoza, "salvation" lay in achieving the radical objectivity of pure reason, which dissolves the contingent facts of one's personal history and religious and ethnic identity. Spinoza's effort to live as neither Jew nor Christian nor Muslim was unthinkable in the 17th century, but his arguments for political and religious tolerance were forerunners for the U.S. Constitution. In this admirable biography, Goldstein shows that Spinoza is paradoxically Jewish, "[f]or what can be more characteristic of a Jewish thinker than to use the Jewish experience as a conduit to universality?" (May) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Beautifully crafted. What seem like separate issues Spinozas pioneering advocacy of complete freedom of thought in religious matters; the turmoil in the Jewish community; the fateful events in Amsterdam in the closing years of Spinozas life; the philosophical developments of the seventeenth century; Spinozas idea of a philosophical religion utterly purged of all anthropomorphism, even to the extent of denying that God is a person in any sense come together as if by themselves (the sure sign of a fine artist!) to answer my puzzle: how to understand Spinoza the human being, a man for whom reason itself was a kind of salvation. Hilary Putnam, *New York Observer* About the Author REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN received her doctorate in philosophy from Princeton University. Her award-winning books include the novels *The Mind-Body Problem*, *Properties of Light*, and *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* and nonfiction studies of Kurt Gdel and Baruch Spinoza. She has received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, has been designated a Humanist of the Year and a

Freethought Heroine, and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2015. She lives in Massachusetts.