Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present
Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd
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Few scholars of religion are experts on Spinoza, and few historians of philosophy are likely to contact this website. Further, this lucid and well-argued book on Spinoza’s political thought by two Australian academics does not discuss Spinoza’s attitude to religion. Yet it still has worthwhile things to say to this site’s audience.

Non-philosophers may remember from their student days the traditional contrast between British Empiricists and Continental Rationalists, which pigeonholes Spinoza as a rationalist. Perhaps they remember that he equates God and nature, that he is a strict determinist, that he had an unusual theory of the relation between mind and body, and that his thought has provoked an extraordinary variety of interpretations—from ‘atheist’ to ‘God-intoxicated man’, with many variations in between. For such people, this book can serve several functions. It presents his doctrines as a coherent and impressive whole. It explains the variety of interpretations by showing how he subtly balances complex strands, so that an overemphasis on one can produce a different overall view. And it suggests how his ideas may be still relevant and fruitful. In particular, it applies them impressively to current issues of reconciliation between black and white Australians.

The starting point of Spinoza’s thought, whether philosophical, moral, political or theological, is his metaphysics. What exists is a unified whole—one substance that he calls ‘God or nature’. It has infinitely many attributes, of which the two known to us are matter and mind. All attributes totally express or articulate the whole substance. There is no causal interaction between them (and hence none between mind and matter), but causation operates rigorously within each of them (hence determinism). The items on which causation operates are ‘modes’ of the substance.

The cash value of these formidable abstractions starts to appear in his philosophical anthropology, his concept of what it is to be human. This starts from our most basic experience but shows how to transcend it. Considered under the attribute of matter, modes of the substance, including ourselves, are material bodies. These are systems of greater or lesser complexity, in continual contact with each other. We are bodies of such complexity that the contacts leave traces which register in us. So arise the ‘ideas’, or sense impressions, on which Empiricists base their claim that all knowledge starts with experience; both they and Spinoza agree that we can reproduce and transform them in imagination, in the absence of the bodies that first produced them. Yet Spinoza, as this book convincingly shows, goes beyond Empiricism in two respects. First, he emphasises the role of emotion in shaping knowledge. Second, he sees us as fundamentally social beings, for the experience that is the impact on us of what is not ourselves involves the influence on us of others. But this sensation-impacting-emotionally-under-social-influence is for him an inferior level of knowledge, ‘imagination’, derived from the accidental contacts that our body happens to encounter in space and time. It is only a matrix from which higher levels of understanding can arise. One of these is ‘reason’, and another is ‘intuitive insight’ (scientia intuitiva). These reflect the Rationalist sense of our power to reach ultimate truth and are in principle how the one substance appears under the attribute of mind. Yet, in contrast to Descartes, they remain dependent on their confused origins and reflect them even while transforming them.

The resulting philosophy is sometimes strange, sometimes surprisingly modern, and always suggestive, and to enter into it is to have one’s own vision expanded. Spinoza saw it as an indissoluble whole, but we can still quarry from it whatever it says to us today. This book places him within his philosophical heritage while showing how he transforms it, and engages with contemporary scholarship by finding in him much of value. I shall not discuss how far it uncovers the true Spinoza,
and how far it reads into him our current concerns (see pp 6–8). For even if we use him as a mirror in which to see our own faces, the value of the mirror remains; so I focus on what I have seen in it.

A central concern today is collective responsibility: can individuals be responsible for things done by a group to which they belong? In such cases we normally fall back, the book argues, on a contractual model. If individuals have freely joined a group, they may have to suffer for its wrongs, as when shareholders’ profits are reduced by a fine imposed on a company. But this model cannot apply to groups we have not voluntarily joined, such as a nation into which we are born. Then it must say either that individuals have no responsibility at all for wrongs that they did not themselves commit or that the collectivity is a sort of super-individual, so that punishing innocent individuals in it is no worse than maltreating the cells of which a guilty person’s body is composed.

Here it is valuable, the book claims, to focus on Spinoza’s concept of individuality. For him, ‘individual selfhood is not possible in isolation’ (p 65). Its growth comes only through emotional interaction with others, in a process that continually determines and redetermines our identity as we identify with many different groups in different contexts. We are embedded in our ‘social imaginary’ (p 39), the emotionally powerful way that our groups conceive themselves and their history. Focusing on this ‘transindividuality’ suggests how individuals ‘can take responsibility for what they have not themselves done’ (p 74). When we see ‘how our past continues in our present’, we also see ‘we are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are’ (p 81). This approach is then applied in detail to contemporary debates, and the conclusion is drawn that non-Indigenous Australians must accept responsibility for what their ancestors did to the dispossessed.

Many, of course, strongly reject any extension of responsibility in this way. I believe that a crucial point about our thinking here is an asymmetry between attributing responsibility and accepting it. In principle, we attribute it only to what someone has done. We very easily forget this in, for example, attitudes towards enemies in wartime, but we still acknowledge that war crimes tribunals may punish individuals only for their own acts. Yet acceptance is different. If we identify with the achievements of our community and accept its benefits, we cannot repudiate responsibility for its past and present wrongdoing. Those who feel proud of Anzac heroism should also feel shame at settlers’ massacres. The book does not deny the asymmetry and concedes that it may be ‘incoherent’ to blame us for what we have not done (p 146). But it focuses so strongly on acceptance that it avoids some central issues. In particular, it does not ask why the asymmetry exists. Its examination of activity is confined to a crucial distinction in Spinoza between active and passive understanding, which is what enables us to move from imagination to reason. It does not explore the quite separate question of how our activity, embedded though it is in a social imaginary, grounds responsibility for our individual acts and for them alone. To do so would raise the question of free will and might require us to ask whether, and how far, Spinoza’s penetrating insights could be detached from the determinism in which he embeds them.

The book shows no interest in religion, but that should not be reciprocated. Religious thought is also increasingly aware of responsibility towards the first Australians. It also has struggled with predestination and free will. And there are less obvious implications. There is no more basic Christian doctrine than the atonement. But many theologians are uneasy with the assumptions underlying traditional formulations, while many non-Christians totally reject the notion that one person might take on the sin of others. In working through both the unease and the rejection, how far might we be assisted by the view that a responsibility which cannot be attributed can yet be accepted? Again, in the course of emphasising the connection between reason and imagination, the book has an insightful discussion of the value Spinoza places on what he calls fictions. ‘The fictions of the wise allow glimpses of the deep truths that elude reason operating without imagination’ (p 38). Those who know the indispensability of symbols in religious thought may not conceive them quite as he did his fictions, but they could learn much from the discussion.
So we may be led to look beyond the book to Spinoza’s views on religion. He wrote extensively on biblical—or at least Old Testament—themes, but this may be the least interesting part of his thought today. His total acceptance of the emerging new science led him to look for explanations under the attribute of matter. This, together with his hatred of bigotry and intolerance, and his association of them with anthropomorphism and superstition, produced a powerful critique of the religion of his day. For those who already see an opposition between science and religion, it is easy to read this as nothing but an anti-religious polemic, even though most of it is acceptable to theologians today. Yet his thought also has another aspect. He passionately proclaimed the possibility and the need of a standpoint that transcended not only our ordinary understanding but also our ordinary values. So, unlike most Western philosophy, he offers not just intellectual answers but also in some sense a spirituality, a path of transformation of the self.

The point here is not to try to assimilate him to religious traditions that he rejected, but to gain insight from both the differences and the similarities. His bitter opposition to the religion of his day echoes that of many great religious figures. Conventional religion, Jesus said, kills its prophets and then builds tombs to their memory (Matt 23:29–31), and we see this as clearly in the history of Christianity as elsewhere. Spinoza’s critique may make us more sensitive to this evil, while, at the same time, his portrayal of the power of imagination over reason might help us to see how it arises, and even to recognise its inevitability. As for differences, one important one may be that the great religious figures typically draw inspiration from their tradition, or social imaginary, even while they struggle to transform it. Spinoza’s spirituality, on the other hand, is that of an ultimate outsider—a Jew in anti-Semitic 17th-century Europe, a refugee whose family had fled the Portuguese Inquisition to Holland, and, finally, an outcaste from his own synagogue community because of his unorthodox views. He speaks out of an agonising isolation, yet he voices some of religion’s deepest themes.

Part of his fascination is that he can be read in many ways. If we start from an opposition between religion and science, his phrase ‘God or nature’ seems to say that ‘God’ is only the name for a more rational way of understanding a material universe which is all there is. But he also asserted that the one substance has infinitely many attributes, though only these two are knowable to us. Is he saying, as religions do, that the most important thing about reality is that it has dimensions beyond our grasp? If so, how akin and how different is he to the tradition of negative theology that also insists on the danger of attributing human characteristics to a God that is beyond comprehension? Or how might he have reacted to Eastern spiritualities that reject theism, and how might his final level of intuitive insight (scientia intuitiva) both differ from and resemble the samadhi that the Bhagavad Gita describes as ‘seeing the self in all things, and all things in the self’? It would be exciting if this book, which already offers much stimulation to religious thought, encouraged others to ask such questions.