



Spinoza and the Radical Enlightenment

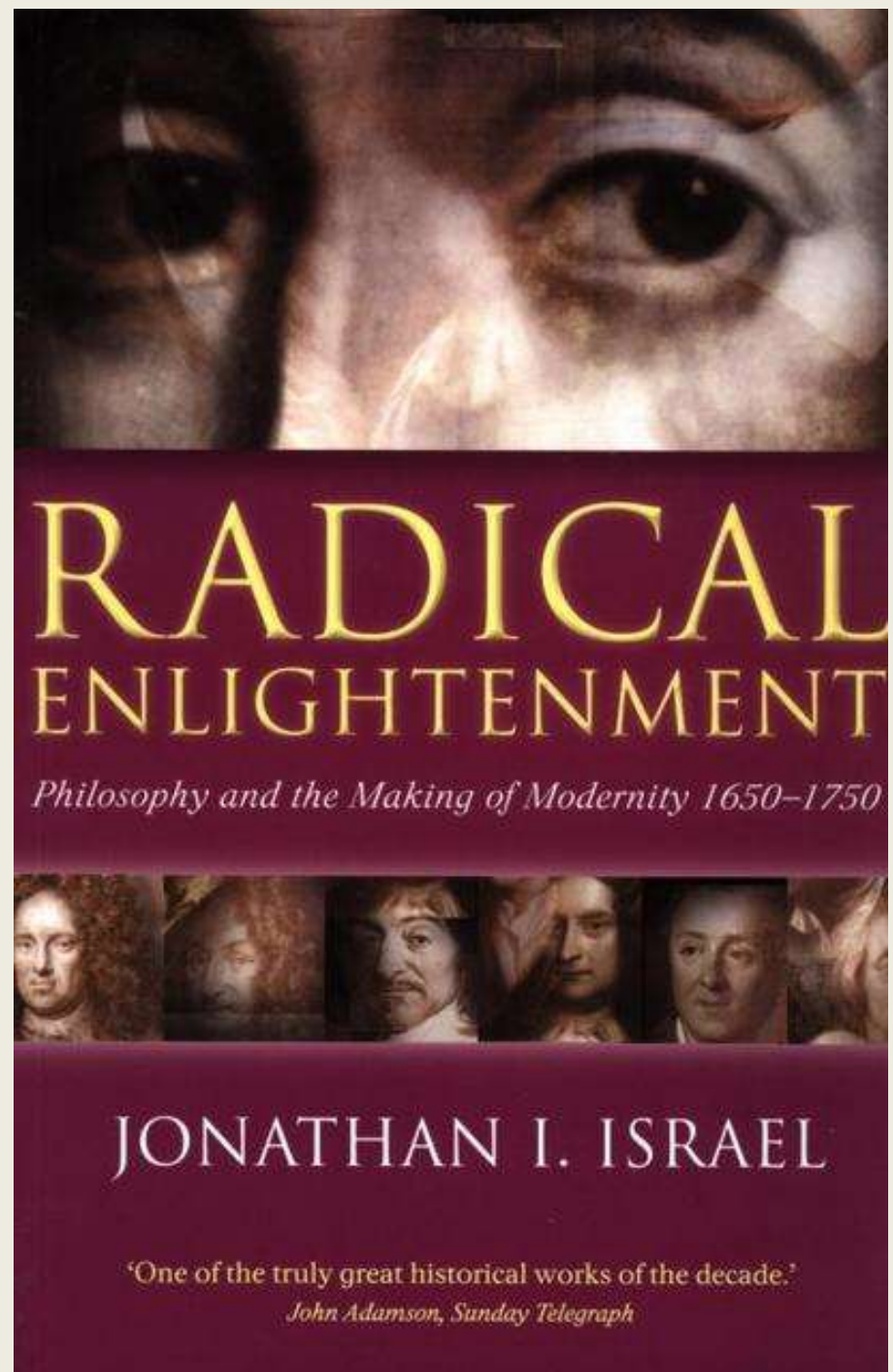
Week 12. 4th December 2017

Radical Enlightenment?



Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1949)—Article 19 states that ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’



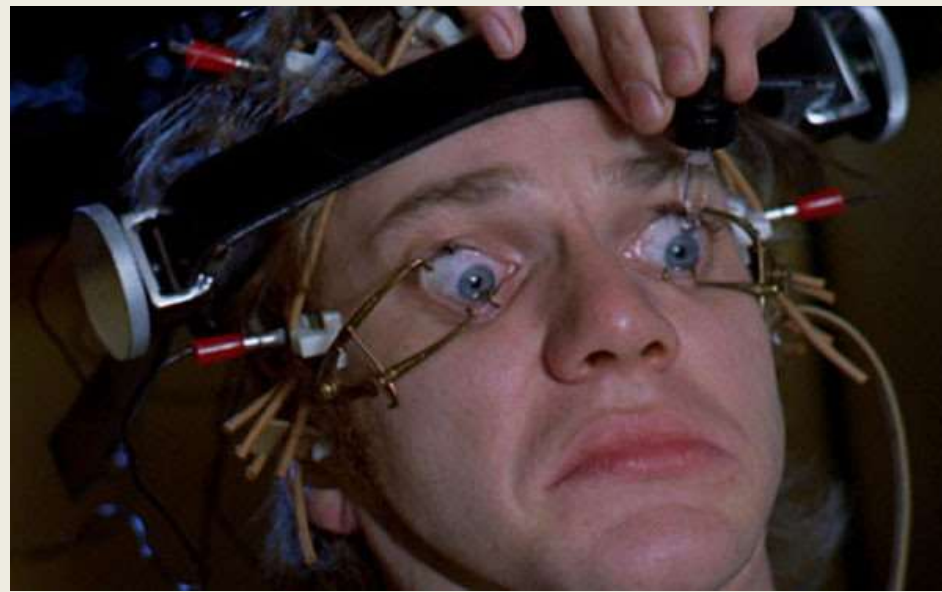


Freedom of speech

- In today's society, freedom of speech and toleration are considered fundamental British values, but a quick study shows that they are relatively recent challenging ideas
- While Locke and Kant are more often associated with championing these Enlightenment values, it's in Spinoza that we first see their fullest expression
- Take a look at Chapter 20 of the TTP, sections 1-3
- Think about this question, then in pairs, discuss
- *Why can't a state take away a person's right to think?*

Freedom of speech

- ‘If it were as easy to command men’s minds as it is their tongues, every ruler would govern in safety and no rule would be violent. Everyone would live according to the mentality of the rulers; only in accordance with their decree would people judge what is true or false, good or evil, right or wrong’
- For Spinoza, it is not even possible that a ruler or ruling body could control people’s judgements...
- Something of our natural right remains irrepressible, even if we otherwise act in conformity
- By trying to stifle opposition and dissent, particularly from scientists and philosophers seeking relative independence of mind, states will incite violent opposition and unrest



[11] From the foundations of the Republic explained above it follows most clearly that its ultimate end is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another's control, but on the contrary to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible, i.e., so that he retains to the utmost his natural right to exist and operate without harm to himself or anyone else.

[12] The end of the Republic, I say, is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata, but to enable their minds and bodies to perform their functions safely, to enable them to use their reason freely, and not to clash with one another in hatred, anger or deception, or deal inequitably with one another. So the end of the Republic is really freedom.



[40] Consider the city of Amsterdam, which, from its great growth and the admiration of all nations, knows by experience the fruits of this liberty. In this most flourishing Republic, this most outstanding city, all men, no matter what their nation or sect, live in the greatest harmony.

[42] These examples show, more clearly than by the noon light, that the real schismatics are those who condemn the writings of others and seditiously incite the unruly mob against the writers, not the writers themselves, who for the most part write only for the learned and call only reason to their aid. Again, the real troublemakers are those who want, in a free Republic, to take away freedom of judgment, even though it can't be suppressed.

Rampjaar (1672)

- United Provinces weakened by wars with England and internal conflict from Calvinists allied with the pro-monarchical House of Orange
- Spinoza's *TTP* (1670) does not influence Dutch liberal republican leaders, and attempts to suppress it begin, though myths persist of patronage
- France, Saxony and Munster invade from both sides whilst English attack from sea over March-April 1672
- Dutch desperately flood lands and manage to repel some of the invasion, attacking the English on the Medway, but William III appointed stadtholder
- Johan and Cornelis De Witt are lynched by a pro-Orangist crowd at the Hague, angered by the war, and mutilated and eaten
- Spinoza, staying nearby, is physically restrained by his landlord from visiting the site of the killing with a placard, *ultimi barbarorum*
- The political climate worsens: the *TTP*, *Leviathan*, and a work by his friend Meyer are banned in 1674. The following year Spinoza attempts to publish *Ethics* in Amsterdam but discovers his life is in danger and delays

The Political Treatise (1677)

- Spinoza's final work, unfinished, is the *Tractatus Politicus*
- Here he sets out to address the 'highest good' a society can attain
- Using reason, he explores how the common good and popular sovereignty can be realised through three different classic political forms: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy
- Take a look at sections 1-2, and discuss in pairs:
- *Why have philosophers been guilty of utopianism?*
- *What are the hard lessons of experience he thinks we could learn from statesmen?*

[4] 'To investigate the matters pertaining to this science with the same freedom of spirit we're accustomed to use in investigating Mathematical subjects, I took great pains not to laugh at human actions, or mourn them, or curse them, but only to understand them. So I've contemplated human affects—like love, hate, anger, envy, love of esteem, compassion, and the other emotions— not as vices of human nature, but as properties which pertain to it in the same way heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc., pertain to the nature of the air. Though these things are inconvenient, they're still necessary, and have definite causes, through which we strive to understand their nature. The Mind rejoices in contemplating them truly just as much as it does in knowing things pleasing to the senses.'

‘[T]he path taught by reason is a very difficult one, so that those who believe that ordinary people or those who are busily engaged in public business can be persuaded to live at reason's behest are dreaming of the poets' golden age or of a fairy tale’ (TP I [5])



Reason and the state

'If [a state] is to endure, its government must be so organised that its ministers cannot be induced to betray their trust or to act basely, whether they are guided by reason or by passion. Nor does it matter for the security of the state what motives induce men to administer its affairs properly, provided that its affairs are in fact properly administered. Freedom of spirit or strength of mind is the virtue of the private citizen: the virtue of a state is its security.'

- *Political Treatise*, Ch.1

Reading the Political Treatise

- A very much under-appreciated text, Spinoza's final *Political Treatise* highlights independence of mind above all
- Whether analysing monarchy, aristocracy or democracy, it enshrines the principles of the common good, freedom of speech, toleration, relative equality and as wide political representation as possible
- It also explores how people in a society can live harmoniously
- Or as he puts it, to act and think 'as if by one mind'...

Collective individuality

As if one mind:

When men hold their rights in common and are all guided, as it were, but one mind [*una veluti mente*], it is certain ... that each of them has that much less right the more he is exceeded in power by the others collectively.' (TP Ch.2 [16])

Moreover, it is impossible for a people to be guided as if by one mind, as is required in a state, unless its laws are such as are prescribed by reason. (TP 2 [21])

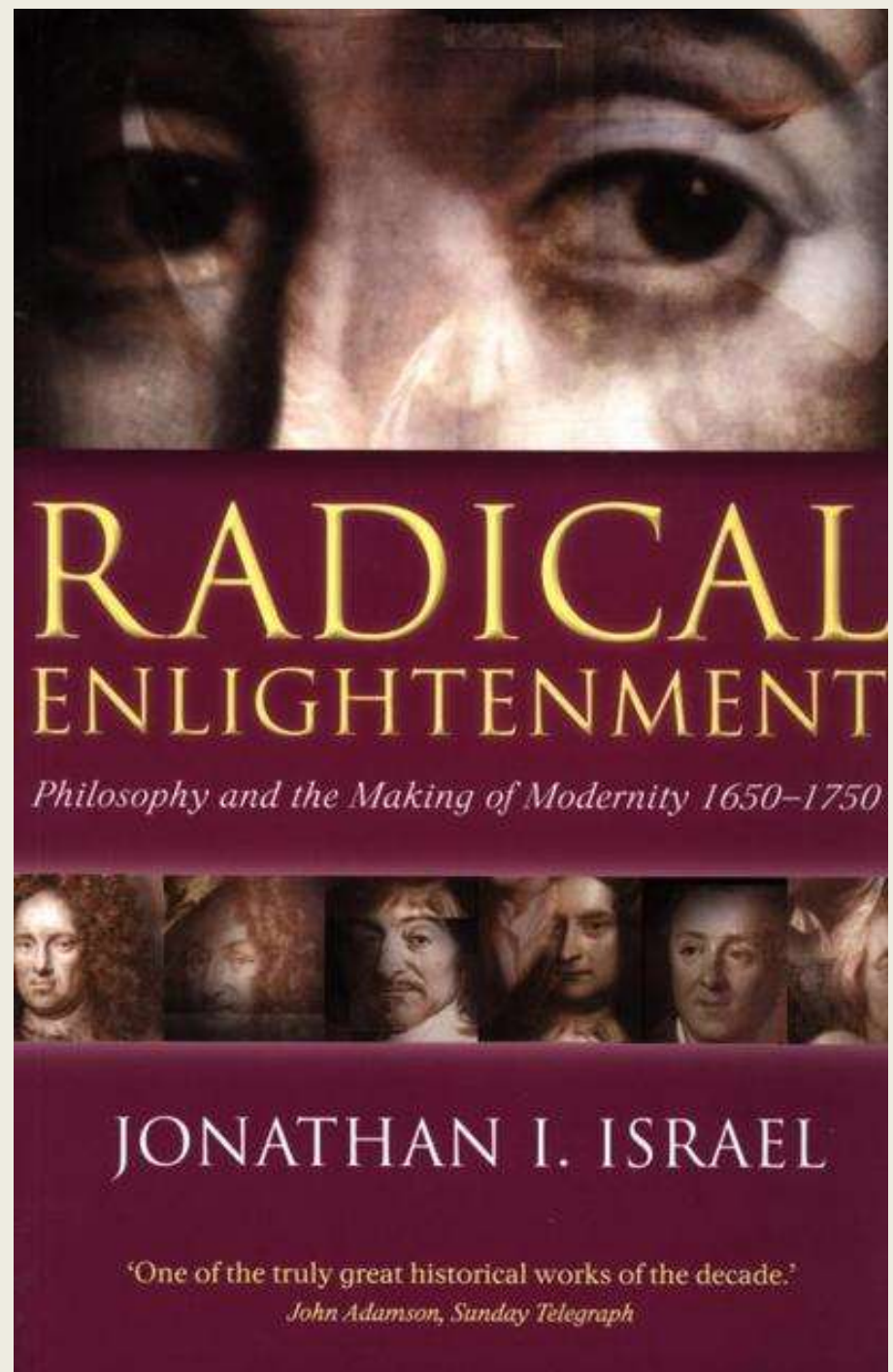
'the right of the state or of the sovereign is nothing more than the right of Nature itself ... just as each individual in the natural state has as much right as the power he possesses, the same is true of the body and mind of the entire state.' (TP 3 [2])

The life of the state

'Now if any state can be everlasting, it must be one whose constitution [*jura*], being once correctly established, remains inviolate. For the constitution is the life [*anima*] of the state. If this is preserved, the state is preserved. But a constitution cannot stay intact unless it is upheld both by reason and by the affects of the common people; otherwise, if for instance laws are dependent solely on the support of reason, they are likely to be weak and easily overthrown.' (TP 10 [9])

Democracy?

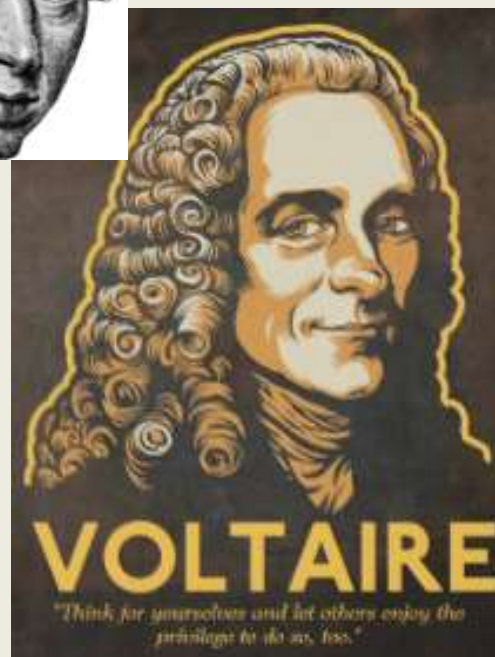
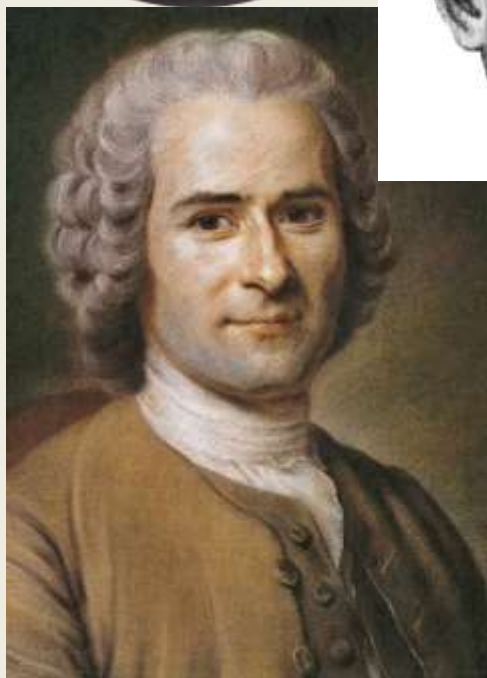
- While again coming down in favour of democracy, Spinoza's account is now more cautious, and he extends the right to vote to those with *sui juris*...
- Those who can demonstrate they have a degree of independence which will enable them to vote impartially
- In practice this means only wealthy men, who can pass down citizenship by primogeniture
- *The rest is lacking... (Reliqua desiderantur)*
- Might Spinoza have revised his unfinished, seemingly contradictory account?



‘Radical Enlightenment’

‘Spinoza, then, emerged as the supreme philosophical bogeyman of early Enlightenment Europe. Admittedly, historians have rarely emphasised this. It has been much more common, and still is, to claim that Spinoza was rarely understood and had very little influence ... In fact, no one else during the century 1650-1750 remotely rivalled Spinoza’s notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority.’

- Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*





Radical Enlightenment

- Rather than being an international philosophical movement, or a series of national enlightenments...
- Israel presents two competing Enlightenments:
- The 'Moderate' Enlightenment, of Locke, Hume, Kant, Voltaire
- And a 'Radical' Enlightenment, principally of Spinoza and his followers, like Diderot, d'Holbach, and de la Mettrie
- While both share an impulse to subject everything to philosophical reason – against the reverence of faith, tradition and authority of previous eras...
- The 'Moderates' restricted reason to faith and tradition, whilst the 'Radicals' 'rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely.'

Radical Enlightenment

- The Radical Enlightenment demanded a ‘package of basic values’ that now defines modernity, including...
- Toleration, personal freedom, democracy, racial equality, sexual emancipation and the universal right to knowledge
- Israel also argues that political freedom is necessarily coupled to Spinoza’s substance monism
- By undermining the authority of mind over body, and religion over reason and politics, Spinoza’s work made it possible to gradually remove religious authority from social life...
- *Are you convinced?*
- *What potential problems might there be with Israel’s claims?*

Critiquing the Radical Enlightenment

- While Jonathan Israel's arguments are very well-researched and evidenced, such a revisionary thesis has been criticised
- As a historian of the Dutch Republic, is it not predictable that he would elevate his own niche to monumental significance?
- Doesn't this simplify and negate the far greater evidence of significance for figures like Voltaire, Locke and Hume?
- Isn't it too simplistic to separate Moderate from Radical?
- Other monists and materialists e.g. Hobbes were not politically radical...
- While many religious groups and figures were much more decisive in demanding and realising freedom against slavery, sexism, poverty, war, etc.

‘the view I have arrived at is this: no deity, nor anyone else, unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power and my misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, sighs, fear, and other things of that kind, which are signs of a weak mind. On the contrary, the greater the Joy with which we are affected, the greater the perfection to which we pass, i.e., the more we must participate in the divine nature.’ (4p45)



Where has Spinoza led?

- Substance monism
- Mind-body parallelism
- Three kinds of knowledge
- Conatus
- The affects, and the joy of reason
- *Sub specie aeternitatis* and the intellectual love of God
- Challenge authority of biblical scripture and miracles
- Democracy
- Freedom of speech and toleration
- What else?



'The free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death'
(4p67)

Thank you



- ‘All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare’
- With that, our course on Spinoza comes to an end
- It has been a pleasure to discuss Spinoza with you the last 12 weeks, and I have learned and gained so much from our classes
- Next term on Mondays is ‘How Not to be Taken In: A Course in Intellectual Self-Defence’, a course to which Spinoza would approve!