

Spinoza, Benedictus de (1632-1677)

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Spinoza, Benedictus de (1632-1677), was an objective, impersonal thinker who attempted a level of systematic thought that is little matched in the entire Western tradition. Born in Amsterdam, where he lived until 1660, he earned his living as a lens grinder, an appropriate occupation for one so concerned with truth and clarity. A Jew, he was expelled from the synagogue for heresy in 1656. He turned down a chair of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg in 1673 and died of consumption in Voorburg in 1677.

Spinoza's main philosophical goal was the search for a good that would "so fill the mind that all dependence on contingent circumstance and uncertainty would end." Like Descartes, he used a geometrical method in this quest. He believed that there is only one substance in the universe, and therefore only one cause or ultimate explanation for all existence. His most famous phrasing of this concept was *deus sive natura*, "God or Nature", because for him the two were interchangeable. He greatly influenced German Idealists such as Goethe, who placed heavy emphasis on Spinoza's theological content. Spinoza's attacks against the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy and Scholastic theology's god/created-world dichotomy are for him necessary arguments arising from the first principles of the universe. His recognition of humanity as part of Nature, or part of God, enjoined him to take a Stoic ethical approach, wherein the greatest joy is a human nature that is perfectly aware and accepting of its place in and unity with the universe.

Spinoza's work, as it was filtered through the German Idealists, greatly influenced the American Transcendentalists. Van Cromphout rightly claims that Emerson came to know Spinoza's *deus sive natura*

primarily through “the age’s most eminent literary exponent of pantheism, Goethe.” Emerson’s idea of the Over-Soul as a final incorporation of Soul and Nature is indebted to Spinoza’s idea of Nature or God in that it recognizes the existence of only one substance in the universe. Spinoza’s stoical view of human nature can be seen in Thoreau’s thoughts on the human community in *Walden* and Emerson’s in “Self-Reliance.”

Spinoza’s life and thought also became tangentially involved in the Divinity School Address debate. He was brought into the argument by Andrews Norton, who made disparaging remarks about Spinoza’s religious sentiments. George Ripley responded, defending Spinoza as a truly religious man. At the end of his life, Theodore Parker affirmed Ripley’s defense by poking fun at Norton’s charges. Emerson made perhaps the best comment on Spinoza’s influence on the American Transcendentalists when he noted in his *Journal* in 1868, “In my youth Spinoza was a hobgoblin; now he is a saint.”

The denseness of Spinoza’s system makes a good commentator necessary. Among the best overall are R.H.M. Elwes’ edition entitled *The Chief Works Of Benedict de Spinoza* (1951), and Edwin Curley’s *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics And Other Works* (1994). The best one-volume introductions to Spinoza’s works are R.J. Delahunty’s *Spinoza* (1985); Gilles Deleuze’s *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988); Alan Donagan’s *Spinoza* (1989); and Roger Scruton’s *Spinoza* (1986). Albert Goodheir’s *Founded On A Rock: The Philosophy Of Spinoza After Three Centuries* (1978) is one of the finest looks at Spinoza’s influence on later philosophers.

Spinoza’s part in the Divinity School Address debate can be seen in Norton’s *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, Ripley’s *The Latest Form of Infidelity Examined*, and Parker’s *Theodore Parker’s Experience as a Minister*. All are excerpted in Miller. His influence on Emerson is masterfully demonstrated in Gustaaf Van Cromphout’s *Emerson’s Modernity and the Example of Goethe* (1990).