

## SPINOZA, ENLIGHTENMENT, AND CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract.** This paper offers a critical discussion of Jonathan Israel’s thesis that the political and moral ideas and values which define liberal democratic modernity should be regarded as the legacy of the Radical Enlightenment and thus as deriving from Spinoza. What I take issue with is not Israel’s map of the actual historical lines of intellectual descent of ideas and account of their social and political impact, but the accompanying conceptual claim, that Spinozism as filtrated by the naturalistic wing of eighteenth-century French thought, is conceptually sufficient for the ideology of modernity. The post-Kantian idealist development, I argue, qualifies as radical, and hinges on Spinoza, but its construal of Spinoza does not fit Israel’s thesis, and reflects an appreciation of the limitations, for the purpose of creating a rational modernity, of the naturalistic standpoint represented by thinkers such as d’Holbach.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, (Radical) Enlightenment, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, idealism, naturalism.

### 1. Jonathan Israel’s Spinoza-thesis

Jonathan Israel’s overarching claim is bold and provocative:

But is it likely, one might well object, or even conceivable, that any single seventeenth-century author [...] can have fundamentally and decisively shaped a tradition of radical thinking which eventually spanned the whole continent, exerted an immense influence over successive generations, and shook western civilization to its foundations? Can one thinker be said to have forged a line of thought which furnished the philosophical matrix, including the idea of evolution, of the entire radical wing of the European Enlightenment, an ideological stance subscribed to by dozens of writers and thinkers right across the continent from Ireland to Russia and from Sweden to Iberia? The answer, arguably, is yes.

[...] Fundamental shifts in the mental world of western civilization no doubt originate in vast social forces and a multitude of cultural influences. But the examples of Erasmus and Calvin remind us how a few wholly outstanding

individual minds may, at crucial moments, through their thoughts and writings, lend decisively formative expression to rising impulses across an entire continent.<sup>1</sup>

The "one thinker" is of course Spinoza. Israel's highly ambitious and original claim – highlighted in the sub-title of *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* – is therefore not simply that Spinoza's legacy endures, that there forms in Spinoza's wake an identifiable tradition of reflection in accordance with his principles, but that Spinoza inaugurates an intellectual development which succeeds in converting itself into an ideological stance which reshapes western civilization. I will refer to this as Israel's Spinoza-thesis. *Radical Enlightenment* is devoted to charting the formation, dissemination, and development of Spinoza's ideas in the early modern period, but there is no mistaking Israel's view that constitutive normative features of the modern world go back to what he identifies as the Enlightenment's more radical and authentic form and thus to Spinoza.

Israel makes it clear that his aim goes beyond matters *de facto* and concerns also the *de jure* question of (in Hans Blumenberg's formulation) the "legitimacy" of modernity. Israel believes that, for "anyone authentically committed to democracy, toleration, and personal liberty", Stephen Bronner's claim that Enlightenment thinking remains the best foundation for any genuinely progressive politics is "undeniable". The radical Enlightenment claim is that "the improvement of human life inescapably involves emancipating men from the collective force of autocracy, intolerance, and prejudiced thinking, and establishing a predominantly secular morality, no less than it involves promoting the ideals of equality (sexual and racial), democracy, individual liberty, and a comprehensive toleration"; the claim is "concretely superior in terms of reason and moral equity not just to what one faith or traditional system or another contends, in opposition to its claims, but absolutely – that is in ethical and political as well as social terms".<sup>2</sup>

One question thereby raised, which lies outside my scope and is not my concern here, concerns the actual contribution of readers and followers of Spinoza to the weakening of religious authority, the promotion of liberal norms and structures, and other defining marks of modernity: How heavily does Spinoza weigh in comparison with other thinkers in terms of historical effectiveness? The other question raised by the claim that Spinoza sponsors a progressive form of

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<sup>1</sup> Israel [2001] pp. 159–160.

<sup>2</sup> Israel [2006] pp. 524–525. See also the Preface in Israel [2010].

Enlightenment and stands at the heart of modernity is this: To what extent is the historical efficacy of Spinozism, whatever it may amount to exactly, owed to Spinoza's philosophy *as such*, to the force of Spinoza's ideas *qua* ideas? Is Israel right that Spinoza pre-eminently "forged a line of thought which furnished the philosophical matrix" of enlightened modernity? The distinction between ideas *qua* ideas, and ideas *qua* general causes of historical change, needs little explanation and is familiar from other contexts: the historical effects of Christian theism and Marxism are of staggering proportions but historical action in their name has been (most would agree) at best loosely connected with their rational content – making it a task to explain how they can have made the difference they have, given that their inherent rationality is not what has made them effective.

As a thesis concerned with ideas *qua* ideas, Israel's Spinoza-thesis is in my view hard to defend,<sup>3</sup> and I will attempt to make this plausible through a consideration of the role of Spinoza in classical German philosophy. That this falls in part outside Israel's timeframe does not affect the point at issue, for if the German engagement with Spinoza shows what I suggest, then it is difficult to see how Spinoza could have provided, to the extent that Israel supposes, the ideological source of the triumph of secular democratic modernity. From this it does not follow that there is no truth in Israel's narrative. What should instead be maintained is that two distinguishable strands are active in Enlightenment thinking, one (broadly) humanistic and the other (broadly) naturalistic, corresponding roughly to what Israel identifies as respectively the moderate and radical forms of Enlightenment. Their distinctness and potential for conflict is evident to us now – the constant impinging of self-assured science on our secular yet insecure humanistic conceptions is a dominant feature of our intellectual landscape – but it was also, as Israel has revealed in astonishing depth and detail, a dynamic within the Enlightenment itself. Even though Spinoza is not as unequivocally naturalistic as Israel implies,<sup>4</sup> it would nonetheless seem essentially

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<sup>3</sup> Helpful critical discussions of Israel, with which I largely concur, may be found in Stuurman [2002] and La Vopa [2009].

<sup>4</sup> In his summaries of Spinoza's thought in Israel [2001] Chs. 14–15, Israel's emphasis is firmly on Spinoza's affiliations with mechanistic explanation and the anti-religious implications thereof. This registers but one aspect of Spinoza; Israel, taking it for the whole, is led to say that "his philosophy was based on modern science both experimental and deductive" and to suggest that Spinoza's claim for the exceptionless character of natural law is a "scientific" theory demonstrated by "experiment and mathematical calculation", which are "the sole criterion of truth" (Israel [2001] p. 244). As if viewing Spinoza solely through the eyes of the *philosophes*, or taking the only important point at issue to be the non-existence of the theistic supernatural, Israel suppresses the sense in which Spinoza's "naturalism" is not in *our* sense naturalistic – the Nature into which Spinoza absorbs man is not that of modern natural science and nor are the latter's methods those of Spinoza.

correct to align Spinoza with the naturalistic side of Enlightenment and to identify naturalism as what allowed Enlightenment thinking to assume more aggressive critical forms. Now if naturalism has the best claim to the authority of reason, if it is (as many in the present day believe) the completed form of Enlightenment, then Israel's view of Spinoza as presiding over modernity is to that extent justified. What does not follow from this, however, is that Spinoza's philosophy furnished sufficient materials for intellectually shaping the modern world. The following narrative seems more probable. The features of Spinozism that allowed it to cut so deeply also constituted, or implied, its limitations: its critical force was not matched by a constructive potential, and in order to make up for this deficit it was necessary to draw on intellectual resources external to Spinoza or (what comes to the same) to read Spinoza in terms drawn from traditions which he rejected.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that historical figures may have understood themselves to be agents of Spinozism in their advocacy of new social and political edifices, they were borrowing materials that did not belong to the conceptual package sanctioned by Spinoza. If we ask where these came from, there is no choice but to acknowledge that they belonged to the humanistic strand in Enlightenment that Israel calls moderate and characterizes merely as prone to compromise and lacking nerve. The Enlightenment thus combined two vectors, one of which cleared the ground and found a formidable resource in Spinoza, while the other drew on concepts and intellectual traditions repudiated by him: both were necessary for the formation of intellectual modernity, contrary to Israel's picture of the latter as merely putting the brakes on the former.

In so far as reductive naturalism has not yet won the argument, the process and final meaning of Enlightenment remains undetermined. To valorize "radical" over "moderate" Enlightenment, as Israel does, is implicitly to take the side of naturalism, a standpoint which is of course open to defence, but the consistency of which with the political values of modernity needs to be shown, and completing this task cannot be a matter of intellectual history alone.

One way of making the case for the limited constructive role of Spinozism would be, therefore, with reference to his political philosophy. Though this is not what I will concentrate on here, some brief comments can be made in order to indicate the difficulty facing the Spinoza-thesis on this front. Granted that, as

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<sup>5</sup> Bury's classic [1920] Ch. 5, describes the period 1680–1740, in which Descartes' ideas were used as a solvent, as "Cartesian", and *circa* 1750 as marking a change of consciousness, centred on the idea of *man's* progress – a transition from (negative) Cartesianism to (positive) humanism. The eighteenth-century French thinkers valorized by Israel as Spinoza's heirs were not rigorous materialists.

Israel points out, Spinoza is no straightforward Hobbesian,<sup>6</sup> still there are a multitude of respects in which Spinoza's conception of the political order appears sharply at variance with the political culture of Western liberal democracy. Spinoza does indeed insist on individual freedom of thought, favours democratic republicanism as a constitutional form, and even identifies freedom as the purpose of the state,<sup>7</sup> but attention needs to be paid to the basis on which he reaches these results – otherwise we risk mistaking agreement concerning the letter of political doctrine for agreement *überhaupt* and in substance. The basis advanced by Spinoza for liberal principles and democratic rule is that right extends as far and only as far as power, that the need for security is what uniquely occasions the formation of the state, and that the normative and psychological ground of civil society lies in enlightened, non-passionate judgements of self-interest.<sup>8</sup> Notions of the intrinsic value of personhood and autonomy play no role in forging the social bond; the idea that certain political norms are necessary in direct consequence of the dignity of the human individual, as an entity elevated above common nature and possessing a power of self-determination not possessed by other things, is absent. From this it follows that conceptions of justice and equality must be held at a certain strength and that values taken as axiomatic in our actual political culture are present in Spinoza only on a consequentialist basis. The freedom realized in Spinoza's state has a more positive character than Hobbesian liberty, but it is not the full-strength modern conception, and whatever demands for equality Spinoza may allow to be affirmed will rest on contingencies of mutual utility.<sup>9</sup>

To make these observations is not to fault Spinoza's conception of the nature or foundation of political order but to indicate its revisionary character. If the Kantianism which is currently dominant in normative political theory is as fantastical and hollow as some critics allege, then Spinoza's political thought is

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<sup>6</sup> See Israel's Introduction to his edition of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Spinoza's is "unquestionably not just the earliest but also the most sweeping, and is arguably also historically the most important" of early theories of toleration (Israel [2007] p. xxii); the "radical wing of the Enlightenment" – and not Locke's – "was the source of our own 'modernity' [... and] cut a historically more direct, and ultimately more important, path towards modern western individualism" (Israel [2007] p. xxvii); Spinoza argued "unequivocally, forcefully, and as an intrinsic and central part of his system that democracy is and must always be the best form of human organization" (Israel [2007] p. xxviii).

<sup>7</sup> *Theological-Political Treatise*, Chs. 16 and 20.

<sup>8</sup> Similar points can be made regarding Spinoza's ethics: virtue, or action in accordance with reason, is, according to Book IV of the *Ethics*, a striving to preserve one's being and increase one's perfection, that is, one's power.

<sup>9</sup> See Lord [2014].

due re-examination, as offering something more robust than neo-Kantian principles of justice but less illiberal than Hobbes. But, to repeat, championing of Spinoza for the cause of political modernity is no easy matter, for there is no plain fit.

## 2. Spinoza in classical German philosophy

The story of Spinoza's reception in German philosophy begins in 1688 with Thomasius' denunciation of what he perceived as the concealed growth of Spinozism, and attack on Tschirnhaus for his alleged sympathies. The problem of Spinoza occupies centre stage for a brief but important period in the early eighteenth century, causing Wolff's temporary expulsion from Halle in 1723 and ensuring that, for the rest of his career, Wolff would take pains to mark the distance separating his Leibnizian metaphysics from the neighbouring rationalism of Spinozism. Thereafter, until some way into the second half of the eighteenth century, Spinoza is refused entry into civic and scholarly discourse in Germany. Hermann Samuel Reimarus, though following the anti-Scriptural agenda of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, retained deist convictions. Overall then it may be agreed that Spinoza's exclusion from German intellectual life – which throughout the eighteenth century remained more protective of religion and less antagonistic towards its institutions than contemporary developments in France and Britain, the *Aufklärung* having a generally moderate character, especially as regards matters of state and social order – conforms to Israel's Spinoza-thesis.

So too, it may be thought, do developments in the early period of classical German philosophy, from 1781 to roughly 1792. The *Pantheismusstreit*, the late eighteenth-century explosion of Spinoza into the German public sphere, though at the surface concerned simply with the question of what Lessing had believed in matters of religion, revolved more deeply around the question of what can be expected to ensue from the unbridled use of reason. Its instigator, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, identified Spinozism as the philosophical standpoint most directly opposed to theism, and at the same time lauded Spinoza for the unsurpassed consistency of his reasonings. In addition, Kant may seem to bear out the Spinoza-thesis: following Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, Kant characterizes Spinozism as posing the most profound threat to morality of all the speculative systems, and offers transcendental idealism as an antidote.<sup>10</sup> Though Kant's own system was by no means anodyne – the *Critique of Pure Reason* was quickly perceived as philosophically revolutionary, as Kant had claimed, many

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<sup>10</sup> In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 100–102: Kant [1996] pp. 220–222.

contemporaries judging it profoundly destructive ("all crushing", according to Mendelssohn<sup>11</sup>) – Kant is without radical credentials in Israel's sense: in denying a right of resistance or revolution in his 1793 essay on political theory and practice Kant declined to sanction the French Revolution, to the surprise and disappointment of many of his followers,<sup>12</sup> and having in his practical philosophical writings argued for the necessity of theistic postulates as correlates of morality, he published late in life a rational defence of religion which revalidated a fair quantity of Church doctrine and allowed itself to be recruited to the cause of orthodoxy.

However, even in this early period the pattern of ideological commitments does not fit the Spinoza-thesis. The quarrelling parties in the *Pantheismusstreit* did not divide over degree of political radicalism, and neither took the side of Spinoza in opposition to theism.<sup>13</sup> Though a fierce critic of the French Revolution, Jacobi's own commitments were fiercely liberal and anti-absolutist,<sup>14</sup> and the form of theism he defended was unorthodox, not to say radical: the crux of Jacobi's strategy in the *Letters Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*<sup>15</sup> was to seek to force, by focussing on Spinoza's rationalistic (putative) atheism, an acknowledgement of the absolute basicness of an intuitive affective power underlying all awareness of truths and objects, and this general reconception of knowledge, though contrary to the *Aufklärung* conception of rational religion, was not reactionary in the sense of reasserting the rights of tradition or authority; on the contrary, by centering faith in self-consciousness, Jacobi provided for a kind of doxastic autonomy. Jacobi's opponent Moses Mendelssohn, a towering figure in the Berlin *Aufklärung*, held more mainstream views regarding the nature of revealed religion and, importantly, took a much more favourable view of Spinoza, arguing in his 1785 *Morgenstunden* that the difference of Spinoza's pantheism from theism reduces, once the content of the former has been properly determined, to an extremely fine speculative point concerning the relation of God and the world that cannot even be stated without metaphorical imagery.<sup>16</sup> Herder's contribution to

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<sup>11</sup> Mendelssohn [1785] Vorbericht: "die Werke [...] des alles zermalmenden Kants."

<sup>12</sup> See Maliks [2012].

<sup>13</sup> The literature on the *Pantheismusstreit* is extensive. Recent and helpful is Goldenbaum [2011].

<sup>14</sup> See Jacobi [1996]. Jacobi associates himself in this piece with Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Spinoza. On Jacobi's politics, see Beiser [1992] Ch. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobi [1994].

<sup>16</sup> Mendelssohn [2011] Chs. 13–14. Mendelssohn had in fact three decades earlier in his *Philosophische Gespräche* spoken up for Spinoza, whom he there presents as one of the great philosophers, necessary for the transition from Descartes to Leibniz, and as having invented the

the Streit, *Gott, einige Gespräche über Spinozas System* (1787), endorses the rehabilitation of Spinoza, with an additional emphasis on nature as being in its essence purposive living activity. Thus whereas Jacobi argued that Spinoza precluded theism but can and must be overcome, Mendelssohn and Herder maintained that Spinoza, made self-consistent and accordingly refined, poses no threat, rather he paves the way to a correct understanding of divinity. What is most striking about these developments is that they show the reception of Spinoza to have entered a new phase, in which the sense of his thought is considered in newly sophisticated terms.

Regarding Kant, the central point to be made – vital for all later contexts – is that his opposition to Spinoza had an impeccable progressive Enlightenment rationale and was nowise the effect of an aversion to radicality.<sup>17</sup> Kant's political philosophy, no less than Spinoza's, insists on the limits of the state and the necessity of individual freedom, and its implications for political reform, though articulated only in a muted form by Kant himself, were impossible to deny. Kant's reason for rejecting Spinozism was quite simply the absolute impossibility, as he perceived it, of providing grounds for morality and hence for liberal political principles on the basis of a monism which denies substantial existence to human agents – the ancient criticism of Spinoza going back to Bayle ("if man is only a modification, he does nothing"<sup>18</sup>) but possessing increased force in the Kantian context, where the concept of human agency has assumed a foundational role for value.

Israel however discusses Kant's philosophy and its significance for modernity as if aiming to save Church and State had conditioned the construction of the Critical system.<sup>19</sup> This underplays the degree to which Kant's moral religion was finely poised between conservative and radical implications – it pointed as much to the quasi-atheism that lost Fichte his post at Jena as it did to the Scriptural supernaturalism of Gottlob Christian Storr's Tübingen school – and in any case, and more importantly, it fails to recognize that Kant's moral theology addressed a genuine problem for which some solution *had to be* found: namely the problem

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doctrine of pre-established harmony (Mendelssohn [1997] pp. 100, 106–108). Arguments from that early work are carried over into *Morgenstunden*.

<sup>17</sup> See Deligiorgi [2005] Ch. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Bayle [1965] p. 313.

<sup>19</sup> Israel [2011] Ch. 26. Also relevant is the discussion of Enlightenment moral theory in Israel [2010] Ch. 5, where the radical wing is represented as de-moralizing and thus emancipating natural desires and affects, and the *anti-philosophes* (Rousseau included) as merely seeking to protect morality's theological connections. The present question however concerns the *adequacy* for modern moral thought of the psychological mechanisms appealed to by the *nouveaux philosophes*.

of making moral action purposive given the indifference of Nature, *qua* Newtonian causal matrix, to the ends of Freedom. Kant's concept of the highest good, whence derives his moral theology, responds to this demand, which did not and could not have figured on the agenda of the French materialists. No such problem presented itself to Spinoza, not because he had opted for the exclusive reality of Kant's Nature in opposition to Freedom, but rather because his Nature was *already* as theologically rich and remote from bare naturalism as could be required: the highest good, as Part V of the *Ethics* teaches, consists in knowledge of God and its corresponding affect, an achievement which rests on the human individual's identity with an eternal idea in God's intellect. Whatever may be said concerning the relative merits of Spinoza's and Kant's systems in this and other regards, there is no case to be made for the greater metaphysical austerity and hence political modernity of the former: Spinoza and Kant are in equal measure up to their necks in noumenal conceptions (with the difference, arguably testifying to his greater modernity, that Kant restricts his claims about noumena to "mere practical cognition").

The next wave of developments in classical German philosophy replays and develops these themes but weighs more pointedly against the Spinoza-thesis. The generation that succeeded Jacobi and Kant had unquestionably radical intentions. Friedrich Schlegel's aphorism 216 from the 1798 *Athenäum Fragmente* famously reads: "The French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe's *Meister* are the great tendencies of the age."<sup>20</sup> Fichte had published in 1793–1794 a *Contribution towards Correcting the Public's Judgement of the French Revolution*, arguing that this development could be judged only in light of rational principles based on freedom, thus endorsing the revolutionary ideology;<sup>21</sup> Schiller was sufficiently attuned to the ideological aims of the French Revolution to feel intense disappointment at its degeneration, precipitating the diagnostic enquiry undertaken in his *Letters on Aesthetic Education* (1793–1795);<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Schlegel's *Essay on the Concept of Republicanism* (1796) argued for the conceptual equivalence of state, republic, and democracy, and the possibility of legitimate insurrection;<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher sympathized wholeheartedly with the French Revolution and in his *Monologen* (1800) criticized the *Aufklärung* for its political

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<sup>20</sup> Beiser [1996] p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Fichte [1845–1746].

<sup>22</sup> Schiller [1982] especially Letters 3–6.

<sup>23</sup> See Schlegel [1996] pp. 99, 102 and 111. On Schlegel's politics, see Izenberg [1992] Ch. 2, and Beiser [1992] Ch. 10.

limitations, which he (like Schlegel) related to its failure to grasp human individuality in an adequately profound manner, resulting also in an impoverished conception of community;<sup>24</sup> Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel in their early days at the Tübingen Stift were partisans of the French cause, in which they saw a political spirit antithetical to the Duchy of Württemberg and that moulds all of their earliest philosophical and literary work.<sup>25</sup> The situation of Fichte, Schiller, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel, in relation to the older generation identified with the limited achievements of the *Aufklärung*, thus corresponds as closely as could be desired to Israel's distinction of radicals and moderates. And, just as Israel's thesis predicts, a turn to Spinoza is the next move. But for the Spinoza-thesis everything turns on how Spinoza was construed. What exactly did progressive post-Kantian thinkers regard Spinoza as supplying that would carry them beyond the stagnant and unsatisfactory *Aufklärung* and assist in raising human development to a new level? Did they, as the Spinoza-thesis leads us to expect, turn away from the "softened" Spinoza of Mendelssohn and Herder and return to the "hard" Spinoza of la Mettrie?

The first question has no simple answer, not least because each of the post-Kantians interpreted Spinoza differently and took a different view of his significance for their own philosophical project, but one thing is clear: in no case was Spinoza taken up and recruited to the philosophically radical cause on the strength of his naturalism, if we understand by that the God-supplanting materialism that the *philosophes* found in him or even Spinoza's thesis of the exhaustiveness of the laws of nature. Only in one case – Schelling's, for the brief period when he avowed a realism based on *Naturphilosophie* – can it be said that Spinoza's identification of reality as a whole with nature was of importance on its own account. The Spinoza renaissance in German philosophy was premised altogether on an idealistic overhaul of Spinoza's metaphysics, which involved above all a restoration of freedom and teleology. The answer to the second question is therefore firmly negative.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See especially Schleiermacher's second and third *Monologues* in Beiser [1996] pp. 174–176 and 187–192, and Izenberg [1992] pp. 35–50.

<sup>25</sup> See Nauen [1971]. In Hegel the revolutionary impetus carried through in the 1790s to a sustained critique of existing Christianity, guided by a conception of civic piety and/as political virtue (on which see Dickey [1987]).

<sup>26</sup> Which is not to deny the existence of radical German thinkers outside the post-Kantian idealist development. Israel groups together Adam Weishaupt, Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, and Georg Forster as successors of Lessing and Herder belonging to the "German Radical Enlightenment", stressing the importance of d'Holbach *et al* – but not Spinoza – for Weishaupt and Bahrdt (Israel [2010] pp. 70–81, and Israel [2011] pp. 828–852).

A brief sketch of post-Kantian thought helps to make clear how and why radical political intentions necessitated a Spinoza of the sort envisaged by Herder. If the key to progressive politics rested on the understanding of freedom as autonomy – the lesson of Kant, concretely emblemized in the French Revolution – and if the philosophical limitations of Kant (irrespective of his political limitations, with which the former might or might not be thought to be connected) resulted in the final analysis from his refusal to step beyond the dualism of Nature and Freedom in order to form an integral concept of the totality to which the two realms belong, then the correct trajectory was towards monism: the preeminent model for which lay in Spinoza, but which needed to be invested – in so far as the aim of the whole strategy was to validate autonomy – with freedom of a kind that can be thought to flow down to the empirically real, historically concrete human subject. The first such development of major importance, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, though presented by Fichte as antithetical to Spinoza's system of "dogmatism", makes exactly this Spinozistic move: the absolute *Ich* provides for the unity of Nature and Freedom, of theoretical and practical reason, and plays the systematic role of Spinoza's One Substance.<sup>27</sup> This postulate allows Fichte to construct a theory of natural rights and an ethical theory: the positing for each individual subject of a sphere of freedom defined by right, and the self-legislation of the moral law, derive from the need to relate coherently the I of empirical subjectivity and the absolute I.

The same pattern is repeated in Schelling's earliest writings, but with an explicit statement of the positive debt to Spinoza. In a letter to Hegel from 1795, Schelling asserts that "Kant has swept *everything* away," scorns the attempt of (Tübingen) theologians to append to the Kantian letter "the old superstition of so-called natural religion as well as of positive religion", and declares that he is working "on an ethic *à la Spinoza*", "designed to establish the highest principles of all philosophy, in which theoretical and practical reason are united".<sup>28</sup> The work in question, *Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie oder über das Unbedingte im menschlichen Wissen* (1795), describes itself as a *Gegenstück* to Spinoza's *Ethics*, and as annulling the foundations of Spinoza's system, toppling it by means of its own principles; yet also as preserving its "bold consequences", and as carrying over Spinoza's principles in order to furnish the hitherto missing highest ground of Kant's philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Spinoza's superior principles are the unarticulated

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<sup>27</sup> See Fichte [1982] pp. 101–102, 117–119, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel [1984] p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Schelling [1980] pp. 63–69.

presuppositions of Kant, and they concern the Unconditioned which Kant had excluded from cognition in the strict sense: Schelling aims to show that this Spinozian "ultimate" is "the only immediacy in our knowledge [...] the principle of which Spinoza could say that it is the light which illuminates itself and the darkness".

The systematic intention here is therefore highly complex, but what presently deserves emphasis is Schelling's claim that this "second revolution" in philosophy, following Kant's, is designed to transform human life:

It is a daring step of reason to liberate mankind and to remove it from the terrors of the objective world, but this daring venture cannot fail, because man grows in the measure in which he learns to know himself and his power. Give man the awareness of what he is and he will soon learn to be what he ought to be. Give him the theoretical self-respect and the practical will soon follow. One would hope in vain for any great progress of mankind as a result of the mere goodwill of man, because in order to become better he would have had to be good already. For that very reason the revolution in man must come from the awareness of his essence; he must be good theoretically in order to become so practically. The surest preparatory exercise for harmonious action within oneself is the knowledge that the very essence of man consists of unity and is due to it alone. Once a man has realized that, he will also understand that the unity of volition and action must become as natural and necessary for him as the preservation of his existence. It is the very goal of man that the unity of volition and action should become as natural to him as the mechanism of his body and unity of his consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

The key to Schelling's extraction of dynamic social and political consequences from a philosophy which makes its highest principle that of freedom, is its teaching that man is in his essence *non-objective*: "man is not a thing, not a chattel, and in his very nature no object at all". When Schelling describes philosophy as emancipating "the slaves of objective truth by giving them an inkling of freedom", this is not mere rhetoric: our practical existence, according to Schelling, is *constituted* by the demand that we realize the Unconditioned in ourselves – the "highest call of all practical philosophy" is to exist as a "noumenon" subject to no heteronomous power.<sup>31</sup> This final aim subsumes the various intellectual projects of modernity: the "law of freedom" provides the point of convergence, "the focus of truth", of the presently progressing human and natural sciences. In so far as the

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<sup>30</sup> Schelling [1980] pp. 67–68.

<sup>31</sup> Schelling [1980] p. 92 and (in Schelling's 1796 *Neue Deduktion der Naturrecht*) pp. 221–222.

ultimate end for man is a condition in which the distinction which makes the concepts of right and duty meaningful has been transcended, and which therefore obviates the need for coercion, the radical implication of Schelling's thought at this period veers towards an overcoming of the need for the state.<sup>32</sup> The Marxian resonances of Schelling's passage are therefore no accident.

Schelling's metaphysics, which follow Kant and Fichte in requiring that we think of ourselves in dual terms, both as items within nature and also as non-empirical subjects, are in flat contradiction to French naturalism but continuous with Spinoza, whose conception of a life of virtue and reason is properly inseparable from the metaphysical claims of the first two books of the *Ethics*, and the revolution in consciousness that Schelling calls on philosophy to induce parallels the liberation from passion posited by Spinoza. By contrast, the conception of man as exclusively natural in a strictly empirical sense provides a basis for nothing more than eudaemonism – a conception of the good which was entirely compatible with paternalism and which had allowed itself to be co-opted by *Aufklärung* advocates of enlightened absolutism, as Kant had emphasized.<sup>33</sup>

The programme of rethinking practical concepts in the combined light of Kant and Spinoza could of course be taken in other directions. Schlegel in his 1800–01 lectures on transcendental philosophy, again working from the premise that "every individual presents the whole", while also accepting that individuals must be considered not individually but only in the light of the vocation of humanity as a whole, formulates an alternative according to which the organic unity of the republic rests on the "sympathetic virtues".<sup>34</sup> Schlegel at this date fails the test of radicality – he now considers aristocracy the correct constitutional form, and religion to be constitutive of republican life – but the relevant point is that Spinozism has here been turned once again *against* mechanistic conceptions of political order (mechanism is, Schlegel says, "the evil principle in philosophy and reality"<sup>35</sup>).

Following the suggestion of Lucien Goldmann,<sup>36</sup> the post-Kantian idealists' concern with unification may be related to two broad characteristics of

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<sup>32</sup> Schelling [1980] p. 121 note.

<sup>33</sup> In his 1793 "Theorie/Praxis" essay, 8: 290–291: "A government established on the principle of benevolence [...] is the greatest *despotism* thinkable." (Kant [1996] p. 291)

<sup>34</sup> The relevant sections are extracted in Beiser [1996] pp. 143–158. Note also the entry in Schlegel's notebooks, 1798–1801: "The French Revolution will become universal only through the German." (Beiser [1996] p. 166)

<sup>35</sup> Beiser [1996] p. 150.

<sup>36</sup> Goldmann [1973] Ch. 1.

Enlightenment thought, namely its individualistic atomism, and its lack of an integrated view of the relation of theory and practice: correcting these deficiencies required the construction of a new, higher and holistic, conceptual layer. Hegel's discussion of *Aufklärung* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) emphasizes the thinness of Enlightenment conceptions of value and cognition, and the consequent need for it to borrow from the *Reich des Glaubens*.<sup>37</sup> The post-Kantian idealist development is directly downstream from their fusion. Hegel's own conception of ethico-political life, *Sittlichkeit*, is a late and heavily reworked descendant of the programme originally formulated in Schelling's *Vom Ich*, designed to incorporate the subjective freedom of the individual affirmed in the *Aufklärung* and supremely articulated by Kant, in combination with the necessity of a collective life in which individual freedom can find itself realized.

What is of greatest value in Spinoza and philosophically indispensable for post-Kantian idealism is therefore the very dimension of his thought that turns no wheels for the French materialists – the concept of totality and correlative conception of the human subject as linked to the One-and-All through a relation other than material inclusion. Though the dynamic of the post-Kantian Spinozistic development lies in the autonomous needs of philosophical reason, and accordingly proceeds at a high level of abstraction, this abstractness at the same time underpins its orientation towards the actual social world: to think out the problems of metaphysics with a view to satisfaction of the Principle of Sufficient Reason was at the same time to project a rational historical future; in the same way that the *Ethics* begins with metaphysics and on that basis yields a conception of practical life, early German Idealism envisages philosophical reason resolving itself into a higher form of collective life.<sup>38</sup>

If we pose the question of why these German intellectuals, finding themselves in a social world still permeated with religious conception and lagging severely in terms of its political development, did not repeat the moves and credos of the French materialists, the answer is not that Christianity retained a psychological hold which they were unable to shake off, but that they had derived from Kant and other sources an appreciation of the extremely complex and demanding nature of modern freedom and a correspondingly sharp perception of the philosophical limitations of eighteenth-century French thought. Religious consciousness and theological concepts did not need to be deleted from

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<sup>37</sup> Hegel [1977] §§ 526–581.

<sup>38</sup> An important document of this intention is the "Oldest System-Programme" fragment: Harris [1972] pp. 510–512.

their cognitive stock, because they offered philosophical resources for the constructive task at hand and, Spinoza showed, could be incorporated in a non-retrograde manner.<sup>39</sup> The vaulting of German thought over its external historical circumstances grew out of this constellation of factors. Whether or not the German Idealist synthesis in any of its forms is philosophically successful, the vital point in regard to Israel's Spinoza-thesis is that the idealist project rests on an appreciation of the sheer conceptual complexity of modernity and responds constructively to the tensions that inhabit it – in comparison with which the outlook of *Système de la nature*, however much greater its value in providing an effective platform for the criticism of existing social institutions, appears superficial and unsatisfactory.

One point of particular importance for the Spinoza-thesis as Israel argues it concerns the concept of evolution, the Darwinian theory of which is cemented into our conception of enlightened modernity. Here too Israel asserts Spinoza's centrality: the mid-eighteenth century's "probing towards the concept of evolution from inert matter, and of higher from lower forms of life", Israel says, can be referred back to Spinoza's claim "that Nature is self-moving, and creates itself".<sup>40</sup> This construal of the intellectual legacy is, however, highly questionable. The inclusion of motion in the essence of matter was a general characteristic of all non-Cartesian early modern natural philosophy, and the self-moving character of nature, particularly when this is taken in connection with organic life, is most obviously associated with Leibniz's *vis viva*. The impetus to Darwin's theory in any case had its principal sources, as work by Richard Roberts and others has shown,<sup>41</sup> not in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century materialism but in the legacy of classical German philosophy, and while it is true that, as we have just said, Spinozism had been absorbed into this legacy, it was on terms that disarmed it of its hard naturalistic edge and in effect subordinated Spinoza's contribution to that of Leibniz: the Darwin-conducive conception of nature as creative, and of natural forms as mutually productive, whether in a metaphysical or an empirical temporal sense, depended squarely on the attribution of ends to nature, in the spirit of Leibniz's monadology but *contra* Spinoza.

There is one more chapter in the German philosophical development which deserves mention, since it underscores the conclusion that Spinoza's own

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<sup>39</sup> Of the figures named above, only Schleiermacher holds fast to theism, but even in his case there is an intention to transform its character, drawing on Spinoza: see the second of Schleiermacher's [1988] influential speeches *On Religion* (1799).

<sup>40</sup> Israel [2001] p. 160. See also the passage from Israel quoted at the beginning of this paper.

<sup>41</sup> See Roberts [2002, and 2013], and Sloan [2005].

philosophy was not equipped to support constructive Enlightenment thought. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are properly viewed as forming a distinctive strand in the history of late modern philosophy. Both have debts to Kant, Schopenhauer explicitly and Nietzsche by way of Schopenhauer and later nineteenth-century Kantians, but both regard the post-Kantian development with either outright contempt (Schopenhauer) or indifference tinged with condescension (Nietzsche). And in both cases their rejection of the German Idealist legacy has an important connection with Spinoza. *The World as Will and Representation* may be interpreted as an attempt to strip out of Spinozism all of the humanistic and axiologically positive elements that had accreted to it in the hands of the German Idealists and to restore its critical bite. Accordingly the connection with freedom is severed by Schopenhauer in favour of strict determinism: he quotes approvingly Spinoza's dictum that if a stone projected through the air had consciousness, it would imagine it was flying of its own will.<sup>42</sup> Schopenhauer's version of transcendentalism departs from Kant's most sharply at the point where he asserts a physiological explanation and ground for cognition: the intellect is identified with the brain, a natural organ trained on the fulfilment of needs. The transcendental and physiological aspects of subjectivity are thus related in something like the way that Thought and Extension are related for Spinoza. The necessary existence of the *causa sui* is rejected by Schopenhauer, but the implication of monism, that the totality of what exists does so for no end, is embraced.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Nietzsche, the connection takes the form of an explicit self-association: in the oft-quoted postcard to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881, Nietzsche announces delightedly that he has discovered in Spinoza a predecessor, one who, like Nietzsche himself, repudiates freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, altruism, and evil. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), composed in the final year of his authorship, Spinozian necessitarianism and monism are embraced as "*the great liberation*", the sole means "to restore the *innocence of becoming*".<sup>44</sup> In Nietzsche Spinoza becomes again the uncompromising hard-edged thinker who inspired French eighteenth-century radicals, but this

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<sup>42</sup> Schopenhauer [1966] Vol. 1, p. 126.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, Vol. 2, p. 642: "that the inner essence in all things is absolutely one and the same, has by my time already been grasped and understood, after the Eleatics, Scotus Erigena, Giordano Bruno, and Spinoza had taught it in detail, and Schelling had revived this doctrine. But what this one is, and how it manages to exhibit itself as the many, is a problem whose solution is first found in my philosophy." Through his doctrine of the subjectivity of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, Schopenhauer may be regarded as reducing durational finite modes to a function of what Spinoza calls imagination.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche [2005] p. 182.

Spinoza is now put to work to destroy Enlightenment ideals – not least, of course, its political values. In so far as Nietzsche’s critical practice is continuous with the French eighteenth-century critique of religion, Nietzsche is sometimes said to have turned the Enlightenment against itself – that is, the “radical” Enlightenment against the “moderate”.<sup>45</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche show what lies in store if radical Enlightenment, as defined in Israel’s terms, is taken to its logical conclusion. The German Idealists’ (re-)spiritualization of Spinoza was undertaken, as if with historical foresight, with a view to meeting this threat.

### **3. Intellectual history and modernity**

Intellectual history spans two different types of relation, the conceptual or logical relations that ideas bear to one another, and the dynamic temporal relations of historical agents, and it aims at their integration, a unitary picture that explains why men’s beliefs concerning the True and the Good make sense to them in light of the world in which they find themselves, and how those beliefs make a difference to what men do and to what subsequently issues from their actions. Israel’s history of the Enlightenment concerns, accordingly, neither a tradition of theorizing nor a pattern of cultural changes in isolation from one another, but the two taken together.

The interpenetration of the two types of relation is key to the project of intellectual history, but it is also bound to maintain their distinctness: when historical agents are considered purely as bearers of ideas, and their relations to one another are plotted in terms of judgements alone (affirmation, contradiction, confirmation, entailment, etc.), intellectual history resolves itself into the history of ideas. Intellectual history is distinguished by its adoption of a non-exclusive, open-ended conception of historical agents: the bearers of ideas are understood to be at the same time subjects with worldly desires who have interests to protect and advance, and whose identities are bound up with institutions and collective entities and all manner of cultural, social, political, economic and technological developments. It is possible as a distinctive form of enquiry, therefore, only on the condition that conceptual relations and non-ideational relations are distinguished. If historical development consisted in the unfolding of a set of concepts – if historical change were transparently a process of applying, instantiating, realizing ideas – then intellectual history would be identical with history in general,

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<sup>45</sup> A formula famously expanded by Adorno and Horkheimer into a complex narrative of Enlightenment and its late capitalist aftermath as a single process of reason’s self-liquidation.

providing its fundamental explanatory level. Conversely, if ideas were in themselves nothing but instruments and vehicles of non-ideational forces, then conceptual relations would have no *sui generis* character, and again intellectual history would disappear as a distinct enterprise. Because neither of these is the case – because human history is not pure thought activity, and because human thought implicates irreducibly conceptual relations yet participates in non-ideational processes – intellectual history, as distinct from the history of ideas, is possible and necessary. And for the very same reason, its task presents a deep difficulty: waiving the nebulous, purely philosophical question of what makes possible the participation of thought in non-ideational historical processes, it is far from obvious, methodologically, how the two heterogeneous kinds of relation are to be interconnected in the practice of intellectual history, which, to repeat, has the task not of simply laying the two sets of relations alongside one another, but of inter-relating them in an intelligible fashion.

These general statements, though open to elaboration and refinement, are I think fairly obvious, and I rehearse them only in order to highlight the special relation between the project of intellectual history as such and the particular topic of Enlightenment. Israel's history of the Enlightenment is, as noted, intended as vindicatory: though accepting that the efficacy of ideas goes back to the social forces and cultural influences, Israel maintains the power of ideas *qua* ideas; his view is that whatever mass of conditions may be required for their formation, ideas once formed are able to play a direct causal role in history by virtue of their sheer rational meaning – in the same way, logically, that an individual human agent's idea of some concrete desirable end can bring them to self-consciously act so as to realize that end.<sup>46</sup> This belief is itself an article of faith of the Enlightenment, one that, if the vindicatory narrative is sound, the Enlightenment itself gives proof of – allowing Israel to claim to have written a history of the Enlightenment from its own point of view, moreover, a history which shows that

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<sup>46</sup> Israel [2006] pp. 529–530: "the most vital aspects of modernity conceived as a philosophical package, namely democratic republicanism, equality racial and sexual, freedom of the individual, freedom of expression, liberty of the press, comprehensive (i.e. not limited, as in Locke) toleration, anti-colonialism, all the things that make a civilized reality at least thinkable today, have recently come to seem much more clearly and definitely products of the Enlightenment than it was possible for anyone, even the greatest enthusiast for these quintessentially 'modern' values, to suppose twenty or thirty years ago". See also Israel [2010] pp. 223–224: "the rise, growth, and diffusion of Radical Enlightenment [... is] much the most important factor in any understanding of how and why the [French] Revolution developed as it did – that is, how and why it became a conscious and systematic effort to erase completely the institutions and consciousness of the past and replace these across the board with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity". Israel [2010] pp. 87–88: "everywhere it was the new 'philosophical' content that chiefly counted. 'Philosophy' was what lent form and a sharp edge" to the feeling of oppression. See also Israel [2011] pp. 924ff.

very point of view to be grounded in a rational historical development. Such a reflexive narrative could then take up a place as the vital historiographical component of a more general view of modernity as an achievement of reason.

It may be agreed with Israel that this picture is what we should seek to defend – we *need* it to be true, for it would be a plain disaster if it ceased to be possible to view history as a field of action in which reason and value can in principle be realized (that history has nothing to offer axiologically is the view of Schopenhauer – who believes, with unflinching consistency, that we need to free ourselves from agency). And in order for the claim that history is responsive to human reason to stand up, it must be possible to point to modern history as (in some sense) showing this to have actually occurred. But, to state the obvious, this view is open to challenge at multiple levels and from many directions, not just wild postmodernist quarters. In the very first place, a glance at classical social theory suffices to remind us that there is nothing self-evident in the idea that modern institutions and forms of life are essentially products of ideation, and not the auxiliary results (subjective reflections) of the fundamentally non-ideational processes of either capitalism (Marx) or industrialization (Durkheim) or rationalization (in Weber’s formal sense). To require the vindicatory view to confute its rivals would be no doubt to ask unreasonably much, yet it still faces the *a priori* difficulty indicated above: the ways in which men’s ideas concerning the True and the Good modify historical reality cannot be read off the outer empirical face of history, any more than historical agents have internal privileged access to the laws governing this process; between any intellectual system which pretends to grasp the fundamental nature of reality, and the world of historical agency, lies a thick mediating stratum; philosophical thought needs to be *taken up* in a particular determinate way in order to become historically effective, and the dispositions which condition this “taking up” are bound up with social forces which cannot be regimented into a set of judgements.<sup>47</sup> To the extent that this may be what critics of “rationalistic” histories of the Enlightenment have in mind, their critiques are not without justification: Given that self-intelligible wholes of conceptual relations and historical developments are not to be found, what

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<sup>47</sup> As a relevant illustration, Jacob [1987] p. 270 describes the relation of the scientific revolution to the Enlightenment thus: “It should be emphasized that the use of science to repudiate magic was frequently not the work of the scientists themselves [...] It was the new science *as interpreted by the educated laity* of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries that forever banished the superstitions (as they saw them) of the people from polite discourse. It was *what individuals made of the natural philosophies* of Descartes, Spinoza, Boyle and Newton that provoked *la crise*” (emphases added – S.G.).

guarantee do we have, why should we even consider it likely, that reason is what gives the rule in the "translation" of ideas into historical reality?<sup>48</sup>

In this light, Israel's Spinoza-thesis appears as a scholarly brilliant attempt to validate the supposition that ideas – whatever accompanying and facilitating conditions may be required for them to enter concrete historical reality – can realize themselves in history by virtue of their rationality, by showing in an awe-inspiring, intensively researched series of works that the total achievement of Enlightenment, when modernity is considered its product, is properly regarded as lying downstream from one individual mind's exercise of reason. The problems facing Israel's view are, first, that Spinoza's philosophy does not, I have suggested, have the modernizing reach he claims for it, at least, not without idealist supplementation, whereby the non-radical "moderate" intellectual legacy is reintroduced; and second, that Israel's tendency to estimate the value of philosophical developments by their political progressiveness and supposition that this in turn requires convergence on late modern naturalism,<sup>49</sup> implicitly denies the autonomy of philosophical reflection and thereby undercuts his objective of vindicating the Enlightenment tenet of the efficacy of reason.

In conclusion let me point to an alternative route to vindicating Enlightenment, which comes out of Hegel and has been explored in depth by Robert Pippin.<sup>50</sup> Hegel may seem an improbable resource to turn to at this juncture, in so far as he is commonly saddled with a "logical blueprint" view of history of the very kind that provides ground and ammunition for the skeptical view of the relation of reason to history. It is true that Hegel affirms a non-empirical necessity governing the behaviour of ideas – a Concept regulating all concepts, a logic specifying how conceptions realize themselves according to their inner determinations – in the absence of which no deep order can be expected in human history. However, and this is the important point for present purposes, Hegel's view of *how* concepts develop and gain concreteness in human history is far from naively rationalistic. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an attempt to demonstrate that the pressures generated by particular determinate ways of conceptualizing the world, the aporias and contradictions to which they give rise, force on reflective self-consciousness, without any teleological appreciation of the

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<sup>48</sup> The post-Kantian idealist development is of course itself not immune to non-rational explanation: see Brunschwig [1974] esp. Chs. 9–11.

<sup>49</sup> Israel has something in common in this regard with the French neo-marxist attempt to recruit Spinoza to the cause of historical materialism – in both cases political commitment leads to a truncated representation of Spinoza's thought. Lord [2014] pp. 59–61 also draws the parallel.

<sup>50</sup> Pippin [1991, 1996, and 2008]. See also Pinkard [1994].

process on its part, a series of inescapable transitions, the net result of which is a conception of the world approximating in its broad outlines to that of modernity. The underlying motor of this development is the structure of self-consciousness or, recast in a neo-pragmatist idiom, the constitutive norms of the social activity of reason-giving. To understand the formation of modernity in these terms – as the product of, so to speak, an invisible hand of reason – is to think that there is such a thing as *Geist*, but to believe in *Geist* is not to think that anything mental is present on the scene of human history beyond the minds of concrete historical agents – and, crucially, the logic which internally constrains them. To show that *Geist* is at work in history it is, of course, not enough to merely postulate its existence; but without its postulation, and the recounting of modern history in terms guided by that postulate, it is not easy to see how would-be vindictory histories of the Enlightenment can avoid the pitfalls of the Spinoza-thesis.

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