

## Baruch (de) Spinoza

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVEeXjPiw54>

1. How did you first hear about Spinoza?
2. Do you find his ideas easy to follow? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of his ideas?
4. Why is he an important figure?
5. What do you think of the idea that, "Spinoza failed to understand that what leads people into religion isn't just reason, but far more importantly, emotion, belief, fear and tradition"?
6. Do you think Spinoza was trying to replace the bible or was he creating his own ethics, against the morals of religion?
7. Was Spinoza anti-religion or was he more against the dogma of religion? What do you think?
8. What is a "rationalist"? (para. 1)
9. Do you agree that at the heart of his work was a challenge to the traditional views of the time? (para. 2)
10. What do you think of his ideas that, "everything that exists is an aspect of God that expresses something of the divine nature"? (para. 2)
11. Do you think he was an atheist? (para. 3)
12. What do you think about the idea that the way he lived his life led his work to be remarkably original with a high level of intellectual purity? (para. 4)
13. What do you think of his main ideas about God? (para. 5)
14. What do you think about his idea that miracles are evidence not of divine power, but of human ignorance? (para. 5)
15. His most famous and provocative idea is that God is not the creator of the world, but that the world is part of God. What do you think about this? (para. 6)
16. Do you agree that his originality lies in his ideas that God and the world are not two different entities, but two different aspects of a single reality? (para. 7)
17. What do you think of his ideas that "blessedness" for each person involves an expansion of the mind towards an intuitive understanding of God, of the whole of nature and its laws? (para. 7)
18. Why do you think his ideas have been referenced by so many key people over the course of history? (para. 10.)
19. Final thoughts.
20. Vocabulary: Now let's review some of the vocabulary.

1. One of the early thinkers of the Enlightenment and modern biblical criticism, including modern conceptions of the self and the universe, Baruch Spinoza came to be considered one of the great **rationalists** of 17th-century philosophy. Inspired by the **ground-breaking** ideas of Descartes, Spinoza became a leading philosophical figure of the Dutch Golden Age.
2. **At the heart of** Spinoza's philosophy is a challenge to the traditional Judeo-Christian view of the relationship between God and the world. While the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures share a conception of God as the creator of the natural world and the director of human history, Spinoza argues that everything that exists is an

aspect of God that expresses something of the divine nature, God is not separate from the world.

3. Spinoza was born on 24 November 1632 in Amsterdam. He was raised in the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam but went on to develop highly controversial ideas regarding the **authenticity** of the Hebrew Bible and the nature of the Divine. Jewish religious authorities issued a *cherem* against him, causing him to be effectively expelled and **shunned** by Jewish society at the age of 23, including by his own family. His books were later added to the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books. He was frequently called an "**atheist**" by contemporaries.
4. Spinoza lived an outwardly simple life as an optical lens grinder. He **turned down** rewards and honours throughout his life, including prestigious teaching positions. He died at the age of 44 in 1677 from a lung illness, **exacerbated** by the inhalation of fine glass dust while grinding lenses. Unlike many thinkers of his time, he was unconstrained by allegiance to a church, university or royal court. He was free to be faithful to the pursuit of truth. This gives his philosophy a remarkable originality and intellectual **purity** – and it also led to controversy and charges of **heresy**. In the 19th century, and perhaps even more recently, "Spinozist" was still a term of abuse among intellectuals.
5. Spinoza's has been described as a **stoic** and this constantly **pervades** his magnum opus, the Ethics, which was published posthumously in the year of his death. The work opposed Descartes' philosophy of mind–body dualism and earned Spinoza recognition as one of Western philosophy's most important thinkers. In it, "Spinoza wrote the last indisputable Latin masterpiece, and one in which the refined conceptions of medieval philosophy are finally turned against themselves and destroyed entirely". Hegel said, "The fact is that Spinoza is made a testing-point in modern philosophy, so that it may really be said: You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all." His philosophical accomplishments and moral character prompted Gilles Deleuze to name him "the 'prince' of philosophers." Spinoza wrote that God:
  - Is not a person who stands outside of nature.
  - There is no one to hear our prayers, to create miracles or to punish us for our deeds.
  - There is no after life.
  - Man is not god's chosen creature.
  - The bible was written by ordinary people.
  - God is not a craftsman, an architect, a king, or a military strategist.
  - God doesn't:
    - See anything
    - Expect anything
    - Judge
    - Reward the virtuous with an after-life
6. Spinoza's most famous and **provocative** idea is that God is not the creator of the world, but that the world is part of God. This is often identified as pantheism, the

doctrine that God and the world are the same thing – which conflicts with both Jewish and Christian teachings. Pantheism can be traced back to ancient Greek thought: it was probably advocated by some pre-Socratic philosophers, as well as by the Stoics. But although Spinoza – who admired many aspects of Stoicism – is regarded as the chief source of modern pantheism, he does, in fact, want to **maintain the distinction** between God and the world.

7. His originality lies in the nature of this distinction. God and the world are not two different **entities**, he argues, but two different aspects of a single reality. One of the most important and distinctive features of Spinoza's philosophy is that it is practical through and through. His ideas are never merely intellectual constructions, but lead directly to a certain way of life. This is evidenced by the fact that his greatest work, which combines metaphysics, theology, epistemology, and human psychology, is called Ethics. In this book, Spinoza argues that the way to "blessedness" or "salvation" for each person involves an expansion of the mind towards an **intuitive** understanding of God, of the whole of nature and its laws. In other words, philosophy for Spinoza is like a spiritual practice, whose goal is happiness and liberation.
8. The ethical orientation of Spinoza's thought is also reflected in his own nature and conduct. Unlike most of the great philosophers, Spinoza has a reputation for living an **exemplary**, almost saintly life, characterised by modesty, gentleness, integrity, intellectual courage, disregard for wealth and **a lack of** worldly ambition. According to Bertrand Russell, Spinoza was "the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers". Although his ideas were **despised** by many of his contemporaries, he attracted a number of devoted followers who gathered regularly at his home in Amsterdam to discuss his philosophy. These friends made sure that Spinoza's Ethics was published soon after his death in 1677.
9. Spinoza's break with the prevailing **dogmas** of Judaism, and particularly the insistence on non-Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, was not sudden; rather, it appears to have been the result of a lengthy internal struggle: "If anyone thinks my criticism [regarding the authorship of the Bible] is of **too sweeping** a nature and lacking sufficient foundation, I would ask him to undertake to show us in these narratives a definite plan such as might legitimately be imitated by historians in their chronicles... If he succeeds, I shall at once admit defeat, and he will be my mighty Apollo. For I confess that all my efforts over a long period have resulted in no such discovery. Indeed, I may add that I write nothing here that is not the fruit of lengthy reflection; and although I have been educated from boyhood in the accepted beliefs concerning Scripture, I have felt bound in the end to **embrace** the views I here express."
10. Spinoza has been the subject of **numerous** biographies and **scholarly treatises**. He is an important historical figure in the Netherlands, where his portrait was featured **prominently** on the Dutch 1000-guilder banknote, legal tender until the euro was introduced. The highest and most prestigious scientific award of the Netherlands is named the Spinozaprijs (Spinoza prize). In 2014 a copy of Spinoza's Tractatus

theologico-politicus was presented to the Chair of the Dutch Parliament, and shares a shelf with the Bible and the Quran. Numerous philosophers, writers, important historical figures and even more modern popular culture cite his work from John Locke, Wittgenstein, Goethe, George Eliot, W. Somerset Maugham, Einstein, Borges, Star Trek, Mash, etc.