

Curiously enough, Purim can also be paired with another, major holy day, namely, Passover. For, as is well known, this festival commemorates the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. During the Passover Seder, at one point the glass of wine is raised and a solemn statement made. It opens with the words *Vehi she'ameda*, and asserts that we and our fathers have been threatened with annihilation not once, but in every generation, and the Holy One Blessed Be He delivers us from our persecutors. Just as Purim is celebrated not merely as a historical event, but as a pattern of the Jewish lot, so Passover is explicitly accorded this perennial significance.

That there were occasions when the designs of the Hamans through the ages were not thwarted, and when the Holy One did not rescue his innocent people, is quietly passed over by the observance and the observants on both holidays—apparently in order to save the belief in the just and compassionate God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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Spinoza and Spinozism

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I.

As one might gather from his title, Sir Stuart Hampshire (1914–2004)—he was knighted in 1979—was no ordinary intellectual. Hampshire spent the war hunting the Gestapo for British intelligence. After the war, he embarked on a noble intellectual adventure, the fruits of which include five books and dozens of articles on philosophical, political, and literary topics. Hampshire's best-known work was perhaps a brief introduction to the philosophy of Spinoza first published in 1951 and subsequently reprinted in 1987.

That book, entitled simply *Spinoza*, is an appropriate place to begin an assessment of Hampshire's *oeuvre*, for several reasons. One reason is that Hampshire seems to have considered the Spinoza book an important part of his legacy. Not only did he continue to write about Spinoza's

philosophy throughout his career, but his engagement appears to have grown in intensity. Before his death, for example, he was convinced that Spinoza had anticipated the most important developments in modern biology and neurology. His final essay on Spinoza suggests that we study the philosopher not only to help us consider our intellectual roots, but also as a kind of guide to our intellectual future. To help us in the endeavor, Hampshire arranged to have *Spinoza* reprinted along with two later essays, “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom” (1962) and a new essay completed shortly before his death in 2004, “Spinoza and Spinozism.” This book, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, was published posthumously in 2005 and is a fitting tribute to Hampshire’s career.

Another reason Hampshire’s work on Spinoza is a good place to assess his *oeuvre* is the personal character of that work. His 1951 book reads like an intellectual autobiography as much as a study of the philosopher. Like Isaiah Berlin, Hampshire felt an intense pressure which he describes as “a kind of orthodoxy” in Anglo-American philosophy (p. xlvii). Hampshire had studied with A.J. Ayer and J.L. Austin at Oxford, where he absorbed logical positivism and analytical philosophy. From the point of view of the logical positivists, Spinoza verges on incoherence, or, as Ayer put it more charitably in his introduction to *Spinoza*, it is “not easy” to render Spinoza’s thought intelligible (p. 20). From Ayer’s point of view, Spinoza is guilty of raising absurdly “large metaphysical questions” regarding the nature of the universe and man’s place within it (p. 158). These sorts of questions may sound profound, but this is only a superficial impression. Ultimately, the apparent profundity of these grand questions is a result of their perversion of grammar and meaning. Wittgenstein famously cites the observation of Augustine—“What is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I try to explain, I don’t know”—for the sake of emphasizing not our fundamental ignorance, but the essential role that grammar plays in establishing meaning. By defending Spinoza relatively early in his career, Hampshire marked out his own reaction against his teachers and their view of philosophy:

It is not enough dogmatically to assert, as so many empiricist philosophers, from the Greek sceptics to the present day, have asserted, that any statement about the origin and structure of the world must be meaningless if it cannot be tested by experiment.... We cannot lay down the limits of intelligibility in the use of language until we have explored beyond these limits; we do not know what we can and cannot ask until we have actually formulated the questions, and until we have tried to attach a sense to the words which they contain (p. 160).

Here Hampshire argues that Spinoza's metaphysics is at bottom an attempt to measure our intellectual limits by imagining Nature as completely intelligible. But it is easy to see in this passage, and many others like them, a sustained critique of his teachers and their logical empiricism.

Hampshire's 1951 study of Spinoza is essentially a defense of metaphysics, that is, of the value of asking questions that cannot be answered or presenting answers that cannot be ultimately verified. Hampshire argues that the fact that we cannot agree upon a method to resolve a question like "Why is there something rather than nothing?" does not mean that such a question is unintelligible or that it perverts grammar. To the contrary, it is among the fundamental questions that present themselves to "reflective people in almost all periods as being problems which require an answer" (p. 158). Such questions reflect our desire to know and reveal the limits of our knowledge. Spinoza's argument in the *Ethics* is made in this spirit and, according to Hampshire, is all the more compelling because he pays particular attention to language and grammar. Following Harry Wolfson, Hampshire argues that the *Ethics* "involves a drastic revision of ordinary language" by which he means that Spinoza "uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways" (p. 72). According to this argument, Spinoza carefully subverted the metaphysical language of the Middle Ages because its complexity had effectively obscured our study of nature. As Spinoza's contemporary Hobbes explained, the medieval scholastics resemble "birds that, entering by the chimney, and finding themselves enclosed in a chamber, flutter at the false light of a glass window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in" (*Leviathan*, ch. 4). Rather than help them make their way toward nature, language had effectively trapped philosophers in their own glass houses.

To make matters worse, in Spinoza's day metaphysical discussions had taken on religious and ultimately political import, so that the outright rejection of metaphysics could be punished as blasphemy. One strategy to deal with this problem was developed by Descartes, who attempted to preserve the metaphysical terminology but make it more consistent with modern science. Descartes preserved the notion of substance but famously divided it into two—mind and body. Such a distinction alleviates the tension between theologians and philosophers by dividing their labor into discrete categories; however, Hampshire argues that this solution also creates a host of logical contradictions that reveal its absurdity (p. 56ff.). In contrast, Spinoza seeks a metaphysical language that is both consistent with modern science and logically coherent. If anything, Hampshire implies, logical positivists and analytical philosophers should be delighted with Spinoza's strategy. Why do they reject it so vehemently?

For empiricists, even logical empiricists, the attention to language and logic is not sufficient without experimental data. “No manipulation of definitions can ever yield genuine knowledge...” (p. 164). The idea that a philosopher, sitting alone in his study, pondering the logical consistency of his definitions, could arrive at the complete structure of nature is utterly fantastic. Has not Spinoza simply concocted definitions of terms such as *substance*, *mode*, *attribute*, etc., that are entirely arbitrary, such that the propositions which follow logically from these definitions are likewise arbitrary? For Hampshire, such criticism—and one can well imagine that he heard it directly from his teachers—shows how little we have understood Spinoza’s project. Spinoza wished to answer the question “[w]hat must we suppose if nature as a whole is to be regarded as completely intelligible?” (p. 161). According to Hampshire, the *Ethics* is an attempt to identify the metaphysical requirements of “the ideal or program of a unified science” (p. 47; see also p. xviii). This is a logical rather than empirical claim, but it is hardly trivial. Hampshire announces that Spinoza “has anticipated in outline the concepts and theoretical methods of modern science” (p. 68).

II.

As we have seen, Hampshire’s early study of Spinoza was as much a defiant response to his teachers as a study of the philosopher. Although Hampshire continued to insist on the importance and permanence of metaphysical questions, he began to wonder whether he had not taken things too far. In the essay entitled “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom” (1962), Hampshire observes that writing on Spinoza is invariably a personal endeavor and that anyone who has tried “has been, or ought to have been, uneasily aware of some partiality in his interpretation, when he turns once again from his own words to the original. *Certainly this is my own position*” (p. 175; emphasis added). When Hampshire uses the term “position” here, he mirrors Spinoza’s own description of individuals as modes in relation to an infinite series of other modes. Each person’s perspective on the whole, which Spinoza refers to as the imagination (in contradistinction to knowledge), is limited and distorted. As a result, each person’s interpretation of the world exposes his particular position in Nature. The acquisition of lasting knowledge and blessedness, for Spinoza, requires that we move beyond our distorted and incomplete perspective toward a view of Nature as a whole, *sub specie aeternitatis*. In “Spinoza and the Idea of Freedom,” then, Hampshire suggests that his earlier work suffered from this defect of an incomplete or distorted

perspective. Unfortunately, he tells little else about these original defects or about the proper way to read Spinoza.

Only toward the end of his career, after more than fifty years of contemplating Spinoza, did Hampshire formulate more precisely the defects of his earlier interpretation and a strategy for reading Spinoza. In the preface to *Spinoza and Spinozism*, he reports that after the publication of his 1951 study, he learned of Harry Wolfson's description of his first book as a "sound 'traditional' interpretation of Spinoza" (p. vii). Hampshire took the remark as a criticism, and a deeply penetrating one at that. Indeed, he confesses that Wolfson's remark "rankled in my mind for fifty years" (p. vii). It seems that Hampshire had intended his work as a rather nontraditional examination of Spinoza in the sense that it enlisted analytical philosophy, with its emphasis on logic and language, in an effort to elucidate the *Ethics*. But this approach required that Hampshire read the work literally and assume that its exposition and organization were more or less what Spinoza had intended to communicate. But what if the literal meaning of the text, and its organization, were a decoy meant to pacify religious readers and protect an inner teaching? After more than fifty years of studying Spinoza, Hampshire made a startling announcement in the preface to *Spinoza and Spinozism*:

I have now come to the conclusion that Spinoza never intended to communicate his real meaning, or the more significant parts of his philosophy, to his contemporaries, except to a few close friends. He wrote an absurdly crabbed and inelegant Latin, as much to conceal his meanings as to impart them.... Being fully understood would cause a horrible scandal and it would destroy all tranquillity in his life. In fact, he could not afford to be understood (p. vii).

This is a jarring way to begin a retrospective insofar as it casts doubt upon Hampshire's own earlier work and because it raises a host of disconcerting questions—not least of which is why he failed for so long to consider the question of Spinoza's style and its relation to his audience. Although it is a dramatic and even courageous claim, the view that Spinoza concealed his true teaching is hardly original. Indeed, the accusation has been made repeatedly since the publication of his *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670. Hampshire does not pause long to explain Spinoza's motives for concealing his true beliefs in his writing, because these motives relate solely to the historical context and are philosophically uninteresting. The primary motive was a desire to escape persecution at the hands of "institutional religion" (p. xviii; see also p. liv). But although Spinoza "felt it necessary to conceal [his] strongest motives for arguing," such deception is no longer necessary today

(p. xvii). Indeed, the concealment of his true views is a nuisance that prevents us from appreciating his power and originality. The task of the modern scholar, then, is not to dwell on Spinoza's rhetorical obscurity, but rather to make Spinoza relevant by revealing his insights into modern science and philosophy. To accomplish this task, we may simply dismiss Spinoza's explicit or literal presentation and then "translate his thought into the ideas of the twentieth century" (p. viii). Hampshire refers to this true teaching as "Spinozism," and the goal of his 2004 essay, "On Spinoza and Spinozism," is to extract the essential teachings from the distracting social and political context.

By raising the question of esotericism, Hampshire has waded into notoriously murky waters. If a philosopher, particularly one as difficult and elusive as Spinoza, does not mean what he says, then how can we know which statements to take seriously? Hampshire attempts to move too quickly past this issue. To argue that Spinoza wanted to avoid religious persecution is plausible enough, but might there be other motives for esotericism as well? For example, Spinoza insists strenuously on the distinction between the rational few and the vulgar many in his political writings. This distinction is well supported by the discussion in the *Ethics* of rational salvation, which is unavailable to the irrational multitude, whose perspective is determined by its imagination. If this distinction between the few and the many is a permanent feature of human communities, then superstition in one form or another will persist. If this is the case, Spinoza's practice of esotericism reflects a political judgment against the possibility of making men more rational.

The same issue emerges when we consider Spinoza's overt critique of biblical religion. Hampshire readily concedes that Spinoza's attack is explicit and deadly, but he avoids the obvious question raised by such an attack: if Spinoza simply wished to avoid religious persecution, then why engage in such polemics in the first place? Without a more complete explanation of Spinoza's political philosophy, Hampshire's method for determining when and where Spinoza practices esotericism appears woefully arbitrary: whenever Spinoza was "obscure" or "confusing," he was practicing esotericism (p. xxxvi). But does not this criterion measure an interpreter's competence in explaining the difficult definitions, axioms, and propositions of the *Ethics* rather than demonstrate a true grasp of Spinoza's philosophy?

Hampshire's hasty treatment of esotericism exposes a serious weakness in his own analysis, namely, his hasty speculation on Spinoza's ultimate political goals. In fact, Hampshire does suggest, albeit tentatively, a political agenda that motivated Spinoza to embrace esotericism: Spinoza "was ready to wait for a long time for the full consequences of denying God's

transcendence to be recognized" (p. xxxvi). What does Hampshire mean by this ambiguous claim? For whom, or what, was Spinoza waiting?

Certainly it was not the approval of any religious authorities. His *Theological-Political Treatise* leaves little doubt about his radical rejection of biblical religion and theology. Nor did Spinoza believe, as he clearly indicates at the beginning of that work, that humanity was likely to overcome religious superstition. As for waiting a long time, Spinoza saw to it that the *Ethics* would be published soon after his death, so that even if he was careful to protect himself, he did not, as Hampshire claims, "wait a long time" to promulgate his philosophy. Spinoza was apparently waiting for the rise of modern science and helping to prepare for it by contributing to the decline of biblical religion. In this view, the *Ethics* and the *Theological-Political Treatise* helped to create the secular climate within which Spinoza's philosophy would eventually flourish. In other words, Spinoza hoped to undermine and alleviate religious superstition and irrationality in order to create a rational public sphere.

Hampshire's view of esotericism is plausible if we accept the claim that the superstitious condition is temporary, that mankind can be made rational via the destruction of religion, and that science or philosophy can accomplish these tasks. Whether or not Spinoza believed such things and hence qualifies as the first modern liberal is a question worthy of discussion. Suffice it to say that the verdict is far from unanimous. When Hampshire published his book on Spinoza in 1951, Stanley Rosen remarked that he had "confused the eighteenth century for the seventeenth." Nor does Hampshire's own work, particularly his attention to Spinoza's pessimism in ameliorating "the general condition of man," provide a solid basis for modern liberal views (p. 197).

Hampshire's original account of Spinoza, by his own admission, missed the mark because he read the book too literally, without even considering the possibility that Spinoza did not mean everything that he wrote. In correcting this error, Hampshire appears to have made the error of not reading Spinoza literally enough, that is, of not taking seriously anything Spinoza wrote that does not conform to his thesis. One modest remedy for both problems is to approach Spinoza openly by paying careful attention to his own political judgments as revealed in the substance and style of his work. Stuart Hampshire, who remained ever sensitive to "some partiality in his interpretation," would have undoubtedly urged us to do so as well.