THE PERILS OF JOYFUL READING: A SELF-CRITIQUE

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I was drawn to philosophy and to the figure of Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) by the exuberant pleasures of interpretation. I was struck by an enthusiasm for Spinoza peppered throughout some of the Marxist and feminist texts that most excited me in my youth. I was also moved by the idea of studying the history of philosophy from a standpoint of joy, pleasure, and admiration rather than suspicion, distress, and condemnation. Rather than identifying enemies or holding influential figures responsible for current predicaments and ideological maladies, I was exhilarated by a practice of reading to discover friends, sources of inspiration, and paths to living otherwise.

As a student in the 1990s, I encountered such declarations as: 'Spinoza's philosophy introduced an unprecedented theoretical revolution in the history of philosophy, probably the greatest revolution of all time'.[1] 'The entire Spinozian system tends toward … the sweetness of the ethical project of joy'.[2] 'Spinoza is the Christ of philosophers, and other philosophers are nothing more than apostles who distance themselves or draw near this mystery'.[3] 'If to read Descartes is to read what we ourselves are, to read Spinoza is to get glimpses of what we might have been – of possibilities of self-consciousness that run against the grain'.[4] These are joyful words.

I was thus drawn to a model of scholarly life and philosophical practice that was not animated by critique, understood in the colloquial sense of finding fault. Even though I have always been driven by a desire to understand and to resist domination, I did not want to dedicate myself – simply put – to reading figures I did not love to read. I was not keen to dissect pernicious views or elaborate the damaging implications of philosophical commitments. As a scholar and teacher of early modern European thought, I did not want to spend my energy showing, for example, the anti-ecological and somatophobic implications of Cartesianism, or excoriating the imperialist and colonial commitments of John Locke.

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I can bear the burdens and duties of research and teaching most easily when I understand my task as communicating what I find to be empowering, insightful, and exciting in philosophical texts. With Spinoza, I think there is a great deal of value in simply understanding whatever draws our attention, including painful and violent phenomena.[5] With the idea that understanding ought to displace (or at least precede) criticism or contempt, I discourage my students from writing essays that foreground disagreements, objections, and criticisms of the texts we read. I ask them to read from an orientation of charity and curiosity. I urge them to represent views or passages in the best possible light before articulating their dissatisfaction or protest.

My approach to the study and teaching of philosophy, then, has been (i) to emulate the joyful reading practices through which radical and feminist interpreters drew me to Spinoza; and, (ii) to practice an anti-judgmental orientation to thinking and interpretation inspired by Spinoza (and Deleuze). I value bracketing judgments, reflecting on the vast constellations of causes that inspire our anger and opposition, and interrupting our impulses to blame. I have come to be concerned, however, that, in Spinoza studies (and perhaps beyond), joyful reading contributes to misperceptions, a tendency toward unjustified inferences, and an under-appreciation of the need for both self-critique and critique of thinkers we nevertheless love and admire.

Whereas Descartes has been held responsible for myriad maladies of modernity, Spinoza is often held up as an exemplar of counter-modernity replete with emancipatory possibilities. For Antonio Negri, 'Spinoza's innovation is actually a philosophy of communism'.[6] For Jonathan Israel, Spinoza is the father of the Radical Enlightenment, an Enlightenment that never was, but which can still guide us through its core commitments: 'democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press; eradication of religious authority from the legislative process and education; and full separation of church and state'.[7] Gestures such as these associate Spinoza's philosophy with attractive ideas that are sometimes quite loosely drawn from his writings.

On the one hand, drawing implications from a philosopher's claims and principles belongs to theoretical practice. Spinoza writes, for example, that the mind of every human being – and every nonhuman being, but we will leave that aside – contains the foundations of reason ('common notions').[8] He also asserts that we are enabled and constrained by ambient powers and the causal contexts in which we exist.[9] These claims suggest the principle of equality that Israel and others attribute to Spinoza. Absolutely everyone is constituted by the power to reason. Our ability to develop and exercise our intellectual power depends significantly upon our causal environment and the forces by which we are determined. Thus, our lives, actions, and abilities must be understood with reference to our social and political context. Philosophical interpretation involves reasoning from insights, principles, and premises to unstated implications or conclusions, which is clearly at play in joyful readings of Spinoza.

On the other hand, joyful interpretation can misrepresent a philosopher's views. The principles above might lead us, as several have done, to infer that Spinoza endorses the second principle of radical Enlightenment: 'sexual and racial equality'. Spinoza, however, expressly denies sexual equality. He states that women are not 'by nature equal to men', with respect to either 'strength of character' or 'native intelligence'.[10] Moreover, he considers and rejects the possibility that women's inferiority is explained by 'custom' rather than by 'nature'. He thereby rejects his contemporaries' arguments in favour of sexual equality. In his day, several pro-woman authors argued that women appear inferior by virtue of social practice, which prevents their education and reinforces sexist prejudice. Only when women cease to be 'buried under the ashes of bad customs', Gabrielle Suchon (born the same year as Spinoza) argues, will we discover what they can do.[11] Freed from those customs that 'abase their minds, imprison their hearts, [and] blacken their consciences', Suchon maintains that women will show themselves more than capable of virtue, intellectual achievement, and political participation.[12]

What of racial equality, then? Spinoza remarks that 'nature creates individuals, not nations, individuals who are distinguished into nations only by differences of language, laws and accepted customs'.[13] Spinoza thus insists that there are no natural differences between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. In opposition to those who maintain that the common people (the poor and discontent) are intellectually defective and unable to control themselves, he maintains that 'everyone shares a common nature'.[14] Spinoza expressly endorses natural equality among human beings (contributing to the puzzlement over his misogyny). Before we conclude, however, that, based on these principles, Spinoza would endorse racial equality, or condemn racial domination, we should consider the pro-slavery ideology of his contemporaries. Locke and other natural lawyers (such as Grotius and Pufendorf), for example, clearly endorse natural human equality and freedom. Yet, they permit slavery (not justified by natural inferiority) under certain circumstances, and Locke writes the racial slavery of Africans explicitly into the *Constitutions of Carolina*.[15] Spinoza may not have agreed with Locke or other defenders of racial slavery in his day, but, as others wrote on the question, he remained silent. Thus, we ought to humble our impulse to make confident and unjustified inferences from a philosopher's principles. A wider survey of early modern ethical and political discourses shows that principles of natural equality were often understood to be compatible with political subjection and racial domination.

I still practice and promote joyful reading. Yet, we should be wary of how philosophical discoveries inspired by delight sometimes reveal more about ourselves than our objects of study. Critique demands vigilant reflection on how desire and joy can nourish wish-fulfilment.

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Notes

1. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1997), 102.
2. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metephysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 191), 167.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 60.
4. Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 169.
5. See Benedict de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), Ch. I, pars. 1 and 4.
6. Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (un)Contemporary Variations*, ed. T. Murphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 100.
7. Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), vii–viii.
8. Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), part II, proposition 38.
9. Spinoza implies this throughout his corpus, but see, for example, *Ethics*, part I, proposition 28; and, part IV, prop. 17, scholium, and appendix VII.
10. Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Ch. XI, par. 4.
11. Gabrielle Suchon, *A Woman Who Defends All the Persons of Her Sex: Selected Philosophical and Moral Writings*, eds. D.C. Stanton and R.M. Wilkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 75.
12. Suchon, *A Woman Who Defends All the Persons of Her Sex*, 111.
13. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, Ch. XVII, par. 93.
14. Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, Ch. VII, par. 27.
15. On Locke, see Wayne Glausser, 'Three Approaches to Locke and the Slave Trade', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51.2 (1990), 199–216.