Symphilosophie

*International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism*

# Spinoza's Reception and the Reception of Ideas

*María Jimena Solé*[*]

This dossier addresses some under-explored aspects of Spinoza's reception in Romanticism—an episode in the history of philosophy that, although it has received increasing attention from specialists in recent years, still holds much to be discovered. The aim is, therefore, to contribute to the understanding of how certain ideas and problems linked to the figure of Spinoza had an impact on the literary productions and theoretical developments of some of the leading exponents of the Romantic movement. Three of the articles in the Dossier focus on the reception of Spinoza in German Romanticism, particularly in Schelling, Caroline Michaelis, Novalis, and the young Hegel. The fourth article proposes to discover an affinity of ideas between Spinoza and two of the leading figures of the Romantic movement in Argentina, Juan Bautista Alberdi and Esteban Echeverría. In order to do so, it reconstructs the plot of an indirect reception of Spinozism in these lands, mediated by how Spinoza had been read and interpreted in France and Germany. The fifth contribution is a vignette on Spinoza and Weimar classicism.

The history of the reception of Spinozism is as complex as it is fascinating. As is well known, Spinoza was a philosopher who was censored and persecuted both during his lifetime and after his death. Ever since his expulsion from the Jewish community in 1656, he had been regarded with suspicion. The publication of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in 1670 confirmed many of his contemporaries' concerns. In it, Spinoza defended democracy as the best system of government and presented freedom of expression as an inalienable right. He also proposed separating church and state and considered the Holy Scriptures as a text written by human beings for human

* Professor of History of Modern Philosophy at the Philosophy Department, Universidad de Buenos Aires / Independent Researcher at the Argentinian National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) – jimenasole@filo.uba.ar

beings. The book was denounced as heretical and blasphemous by religious authorities and was confiscated and banned by political authorities. A few years later, when Spinoza intended to deliver the manuscript of his *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata* to his publisher, he was forced to abandon its publication because rumors had spread that the book he was about to send to press contained a demonstration of the non-existence of God.

The posthumous publication of the *Ethica* in 1677 prompted the appearance of numerous controversial writings that sought to denounce his thought as unacceptable, dangerous, and absurd. At the same time, he aroused intense curiosity, which explains the appearance, at the turn of the century, of a series of biographies of Spinoza, which were widely circulated throughout the 18th century and established some of the commonplaces of the discussion surrounding his figure, such as the image of Spinoza as a virtuous atheist presented by Johannes Colerus or Pierre Bayle's assertion that Spinoza was a systematic atheist.

Despite the strong reaction against him, or perhaps precisely because orthodox thinkers never stopped fighting and refuting him, Spinoza did not fall into oblivion. Spinoza was the Cursed philosopher, the Prince of atheists, and the messenger from hell sent to subvert order on Earth. The term Spinozist became an insult, and being accused of Spinozism had serious consequences. This is confirmed by the case of Christian Wolff, who in 1723 was forced to leave his position at the University of Halle and the territory of Prussia after being publicly denounced as a follower of Spinoza. However, there were also some who vindicated him, certain clandestine Spinozists who saw in the arguments of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* an inspiration for their own battle against religious orthodoxy and monarchical despotism. Proof of this underground interest in Spinoza's ideas is the appearance in 1744 of the first German translation of the *Ethica*, whose author, Johann Lorenz Schmidt, was convicted and persecuted.

The situation changed radically after 1785, when F.H. Jacobi published his *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*. This small book contains the correspondence that Jacobi had maintained with M. Mendelssohn for more than two years, thanks to the mediation of Elise Reimarus. The trigger had been the famous conversation Jacobi had had with Lessing in 1780 in Wolfenbüttel, shortly before his death. According to Jacobi, Lessing confessed his complete agreement with Spinoza, vindicated the motto *Hen kai pan* (one and all)—long associated with Spinozian pantheism—and lamented that the vilified philosopher was still treated like a dead dog.

Drawing on Lessing's authority, Jacobi challenged the widespread opinion about the limited philosophical value of Spinoza's doctrine and, on the contrary, argued that Spinozism was, in fact, the only philosophy, the most coherent result of human reason, a complete and irrefutable system. The spirit of Spinozism, according to Jacobi, was the principle *a nihilo nihil fit* (nothing comes from nothing), and this radicalization of causal explanation had led him to postulate an immanent cause of the universe, without understanding or will, from which everything followed with the utmost necessity. Thus, Spinozism—and all rationalist philosophy, including Mendelssohn's enlightened philosophy—led, according to Jacobi, to fatalism and atheism. Faced with this unacceptable result, his proposal was to take a leap of faith, abandon philosophy, and embrace belief in a transcendent, creator, personal, free, and good God.

Mendelssohn was compelled to defend both the memory of his friend Lessing and, above all, the Enlightenment itself against the accusation of Spinozism. He deployed his efforts in his last work, *Morgenstunden* (Morning Hours), but they were ineffective. All he achieved was to highlight the weakness of his rationalist position, deepening the crisis of the traditional way of doing philosophy. On the contrary, it was Kant who successfully found a way out of the dilemma posed by Jacobi. He did so by showing that the alternative between a fatalistic and atheistic philosophy or a non-philosophy based on faith did not exhaust all options. In his 1786 article, entitled "Was heißt: sich im Denken Orientieren?" (What does it mean: to orient oneself in thinking?), he presented his rational faith as a triumphant way out of the dilemma and, in an extensive footnote, responded to those who had found support for Spinozism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For him, Spinozism was dogmatism: Spinoza, like Mendelssohn, had not carried out the necessary critical examination of reason, did not recognize the limits of reason in its theoretical use, and had produced a completely false system.

Meanwhile, in Weimar, Goethe and Herder had also begun reading the *Ethica* together and, unlike Jacobi, Mendelssohn, and Kant, they were strongly attracted to Spinoza's philosophy. Both rejected Jacobi's interpretation, which identified Spinozism with atheism. Goethe expressed his interpretation in a short text, *Studie nach Spinoza*, and in a letter to Jacobi in June 1795, he stated that Spinoza does not prove the existence of God, because existence is God. Herder, for his part, published *Gott. Einige Gespräche*, in which he argued that for Spinoza the idea of divinity is the first and last of all ideas, and proposed that Spinoza be considered a fanatic of divine existence. In this work, which had an immense impact on the exponents of early Romanticism, Herder reinterpreted Spinoza's God as the

supreme principle of life, the original force (*Urkraft*) that acts through each of the particular forces of nature. This vitalistic and immanent notion of divinity allowed him to develop a conception of religion and morality that challenged the paradigm of Enlightenment philosophy.

This controversy, which, as I have just outlined, involved the leading figures of the German intellectual scene—now known as the *Pantheismusstreit*—put Spinoza at the center of the debate for the first time. More than a hundred years after his death, Spinoza's doctrine experienced a true renaissance. His texts were considered worthy of study and his ideas were discussed publicly without resorting to the strategies of defamation and misrepresentation that had been dominant until then.

However, this brief summary of the different positions that arose in the heat of the controversy is enough to understand that the Spinoza who was resurrected in Germany at the end of the 18th century did not present a clear figure with well-defined contours. On the contrary, he was a Spinoza with many very different, even contradictory faces, who stirred up very different reactions, winning both supporters and enemies alike. But in addition, and perhaps more importantly, "Spinoza" represented a problem, namely, the problem of how to practice philosophy without falling into the abyss of atheism and fatalism. Indeed, towards the end of the 18th century, anyone who wanted to venture down the path of philosophy had to take a stance on Spinozism and either refute it and show that it was possible to philosophize in a different way, or vindicate its radical rationalism and accept its consequences. This was the context in which both Reinhold and Fichte began to construct their own philosophical systems. Spinoza, transformed into the battlefield where the fate of all philosophy was being decided, was for them a privileged interlocutor whose ideas they fought against and also, to a certain extent, adopted.

This complex history of Spinoza's reception in late 18th-century Germany runs through the connection that the exponents of the *Frühromantik*, but also later Romantics and those from other latitudes, established with Spinozism. Spinoza was not for them a closed and well-defined set of ideas, but, as I have shown in this brief overview, an open problem, an invitation to think about the scope and limits of human reason, the conception of nature and its relationship with the divine, the possibility of being free and building a different political order, and above all the role of philosophy in an emancipatory cultural project.

Now, beyond the obvious significance of understanding how the Romantics read, interpreted, discussed, and adopted certain ideas from Spinoza, studying this specific episode in the history of philosophy allows us

to reflect once again on the complex phenomenon of the reception of ideas. Indeed, it allows us to critically reflect on the process by which a set of ideas produced in a given context finds, in a different context, people who read them, disseminate them, translate them, and adapt them to their own interests; people who recreate them and, in a way, appropriate them. I believe that understanding this process in all its complexity, as a process that presupposes both the power of that set of ideas to challenge their recipients and certain theoretical and practical interests in those recipients that drive and guide the reception, helps us to develop a critical and non-naïve view of how philosophy is practiced and how its history unfolds.

Indeed, the process of receiving ideas is usually thought of as a kind of desecration of the treasures of the past. Many believe that when an idea or doctrine is received in a cultural context different from that in which it arose, it inevitably undergoes deformation, misrepresentation, and distortion. To the extent that ideas and texts travel without their contexts, Pierre Bourdieu famously asserts, misunderstandings are inevitable. While there are those who celebrate the virtues of these "misreadings" and praise the productive power of misunderstandings, this way of viewing reception reinforces another notion ingrained in our common sense: the notion that, in philosophy, there are certain places and certain epochs that are "producers" of ideas, while the rest of the world and the rest of history must settle for repeating them and, in doing so, inevitably distorting them.

This notion of reception as misunderstanding and distortion operates surreptitiously in numerous studies, is embedded in a certain common sense among philosophy students and professors, and has significant implications for the way the academic world functions and the various instances of the legitimization of knowledge. It is not surprising, therefore, that this problem, which aims to think about the connection with the foreign, which questions the possibility and the way in which certain foreign ideas can become our own, is of particular concern to us, who do philosophy from Latin America, from a place historically considered peripheral to the great centers of the production of ideas. I am convinced that this concern motivates and is present in the articles that compose this Dossier, many written by researchers born and educated in Argentina who, despite pursuing their academic careers in European universities or in contact with international academic circles, have maintained intact their connection with our way of doing and living philosophy.

Buenos Aires, October 2025