

Charles E. Jarrett. *Spinoza: A Guide for the Perplexed* (*Guides for the Perplexed*). London: Continuum, 2007. 240 pp. \$108.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8264-8595-3; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8264-8596-0.



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The Coherent Spinoza

Interest in the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza has been on the rise in recent years, evidenced not only by the bounty of new academic studies but also by more popular treatments of his life and work. Rebecca Goldstein's book, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* (2006) and Matthew Stewart's *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (2007) are just two of the more high-profile pieces that have brought Spinoza's world to a modern audience. As a general introduction to the philosopher's thought, Charles E. Jarrett's *Spinoza: A Guide for the Perplexed* can be added to the rapidly growing list, offering a helpful guide to the puzzled reader who dares to work through the sometimes rather abstract prose of Spinoza's geometrical logic.

Jarrett's *Spinoza: A Guide for the Perplexed* (itself part of a relatively new series from Continuum that aids readers equally perplexed by authors as varied as Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Thomas Hobbes, and Ludwig Wittgenstein) introduces the reader briefly to Spinoza's historical background and overall place in modern west-

ern philosophy. It offers, as well, an even briefer account of Spinoza's reception throughout the centuries. But its main task is to present the reader with a detailed account of Spinoza's major works, including the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (1662), the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (1675-76), and, of course, his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics* (1677).

The book is in fact devoted primarily to a point-by-point discussion of the *Ethics*, and herein lies its real accomplishment. Jarrett follows Spinoza's own division of the *Ethics* into five parts (on God, knowledge, emotions, ethics, and blessedness), and painstakingly works through the main developments in each. Especially helpful is the "Recommended Order of Readings" that Jarrett offers for each of the five sections. In these lists, he identifies the crucial paragraphs and corollaries of each section, indicating in brief the content of those paragraphs and corollaries. Then, in the remainder of each chapter, he elaborates on each selected section. The perplexed reader who does not even know where to start—or how to

recognize important shifts in Spinoza's arguments—will find these detailed treatments particularly illuminating.

Even more useful are the sections at the end of each chapter, entitled “Comparison of Spinoza with Others,” and “Problems and Disputed Issues of Interpretation.” In the comparisons, Jarrett situates the specifics of Spinoza's arguments—which he will have just outlined in the preceding pages—against Spinoza's contemporaries: David Hume, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Leibniz, and (with an occasional nod) John Locke. Although Immanuel Kant was not a contemporary, Jarrett often juxtaposes his thought against Spinoza's for purposes of clarification—especially when discussing epistemological problems. In the sections labeled “Problems and Disputed Issues of Interpretation,” Jarrett points to the most relevant scholarly debates about particular issues. These might include Spinoza's understanding of “God” (whether God is matter, the laws of nature, or “all things” [p. 56]) or his approach to emotions and therapy (whether his theory of emotions anticipates more closely the psychotherapy of Sigmund Freud or the existential therapy of Jean-Paul Sartre [pp. 168-169]).

It is important to note that Jarrett approaches Spinoza's work from a strictly philosophical standpoint. In this regard, his primary aim is to explicate the central and most difficult elements of Spinoza's most prominent works, and to present his thought as coherently as possible. Indeed, Jarrett moves easily between Spinoza's various texts—written at various times of his life—allowing one text to provide clarification of another. When addressing the issue of God in Spinoza's thought, for instance, Jarrett jumps between the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (ca. 1660), and the *Ethics*, drawing out contradictions but in search of overall coherence (pp. 58-59).

I mention this methodological tendency only because it provides an opportunity to think about the complementarity of philosophical and intellectual-historical

work (especially relevant since I am writing for a history network). It seems the more historically minded scholar might approach the tensions between different phases of Spinoza's writings—and even within particular texts—from a slightly different angle, using those tensions perhaps as a means to get at the historical tensions in which Spinoza was living and on which he might have been commenting. Moreover, where Jarrett relies on secondary literature both in his search for coherence and in his refinement of problematic claims in Spinoza's work, the intellectual historian might be as inclined to historicize the secondary literature itself, drawing attention to the specific kinds of problems that have preoccupied thinkers at different times over the centuries.

Indeed, the reader looking for new historical interpretations of either Spinoza or the seventeenth century will find on the whole little of interest in Jarrett's study. For that, one might better turn to Steven Nadler's book, *Spinoza: A Life* (2001) or to Jonathan Israel's weighty *Radical Enlightenment* (2002). Nor will the reader find in Jarrett's work a particularly reader-friendly general introduction to Spinoza's life or work or an explanation of his recent resurgence in intellectual circles. For more general or readerly interpretations of Spinoza's broad relevance and staying power, one might better turn to Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza*, Steven Smith's *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (1998), Antonio Negri's *The Savage Anomaly* (2000), or Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), among others. But then, these are not Jarrett's aims. He is, rather, interested in presenting in terms as clear—if at times dense—as possible the strictly and almost timeless philosophical problems Spinoza addressed. For the reader set to wade through the *Ethics* in particular—be that scholar in history, philosophy, literature, or any neighboring field—Jarrett's guide could prove an invaluable tool. In this regard, it assumes that the “perplexed” reader of Spinoza is not the uninitiated, but rather the reader who knows just enough about Spinoza's thought to realize the challenge he/she faces. And for that “perplexed” reader, Jarrett's book will indeed be the welcome guide its title promises.

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