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# Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752

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# Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752

By Jonathan I. Israel

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; 983 pp.; hb. £ 30.00; ISBN: 0-19-927922-5.

[1] With his latest book *Enlightenment Contested*, Jonathan Israel has made an impressive argument in favour of the view that philosophical ideas shape, or at least help to shape, human history. What ideas, however, does he have in mind? Israel brings forward a specific set of notions: ‘toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipation, and the universal right to knowledge and “enlightenment”’ (p. 11) and argues that these are at the heart of what defines our system of modern Western values. At the same time, he maintains that we owe these ideas exclusively to a group of early modern ‘Radical’ thinkers, who first defended them on the basis of a combination of atheist and anti-authoritarian viewpoints closely linked to the philosophy of Spinoza. Despite its nearly 1000 pages, Israel’s book fails to prove either of these latter theses, although it does deserve to attract the public and scholarly attention it is bound to receive.

[2] *Enlightenment Contested* is remarkable for its scope and detailed presentation, as well as for the author’s immense knowledge of primary and secondary sources. This may too easily go unnoticed, since readers of books such as *The Dutch Republic* (1995) and *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) have already become familiar with Israel’s seemingly boundless erudition. As for its contents, *Enlightenment Contested* again has some marvellous new insights to offer. Even if these have not gone completely unnoticed before, Israel’s presentation puts them into a new perspective. The idea of a radicalisation of positions in early eighteenth-century France, due to the absence of a broad movement of Enlightenment moderates, is an interesting view not found in Israel’s earlier works. Other views invoke Israel’s earlier position in *Radical Enlightenment*. The way, for instance, in which, on the authority of Pierre Bayle, Spinoza’s philosophy was presented as a follow-up to ancient systems such as that of the philosopher Strato (c. 335–270 BC), and the debates surrounding the supposedly theistic core of Confucianism, reveal what issues were at stake in early eighteenth-century thought.

[3] It is no exaggeration to say that *Radical Enlightenment* single-handedly reshaped, and *Enlightenment Contested* now confirms, some of our most basic

views concerning the Enlightenment and its prime philosophical factors. Israel's way of looking at things has put into the background some of the greatest names traditionally associated with the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Newton, Leibniz, Wolff, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hume and Kant, all of whom Israel portrays as mere Enlightenment 'moderates'. Likewise, his new approach has put an end to nationalistic interpretations that confined 'the Enlightenment' to regional centres of eighteenth-century intellectual history. Israel's alternative interpretation, instead, focuses on a 'Radical' form of Enlightenment that was represented throughout Europe, although it had its roots primarily in the Dutch Republic and in the intellectual centres of the Huguenot *refuge*.

[4] The contrast between moderate and radical strands of intellectual thought nurtures the idea that we 'moderns' stand closer to 'radical' than to 'moderate', or 'mainstream' Enlightenment, since many of the individual liberties that we hold dear (freedoms related to political life, personal conviction, sex and sexuality) seem to have been better represented in the works of radicals than in those of mainstream figures. We find particular views, such as the idea of a moral society not dominated by religion, and the idea of individual freedom and equality, to be represented in authors such as Bayle and Mandeville, for instance, rather than Locke or Montesquieu. At the same time, it is questionable whether we should equate our present-day notions of individual freedom with a specific early modern position in philosophy. A libertine notion of freedom and 'emancipation' may have been found in early modern city cultures such as early seventeenth-century Paris, or fifteenth-century Florence, just as much as it was found in eighteenth-century London and late seventeenth-century Amsterdam. And if ideas were causal factors in the acceptance of modern convictions, later Romantic notions of individual freedom may be far more relevant to explain our own ideologies than eighteenth-century political ideas. More to the point with respect to Israel's claims, we might say that it is highly debatable whether our notions of liberty found their origin primarily in the philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza. Indeed, they may not even have been shared by the authors and philosophers Israel numbers amongst the *Spinozistes*, including Spinoza himself.

[5] In order to answer earlier criticisms, Israel starts off *Enlightenment Contested* with two introductory chapters dealing, amongst other things, with the question of whether it is right to attribute a form of 'Spinozism' to eighteenth-century authors who have not traditionally been regarded as followers of Spinoza—or who, despite having embraced (some of) Spinoza's philosophical and political ideas, were forced to hide them or chose not to flaunt their sympathy with the Amsterdam philosopher. Israel himself has done a lot of fine work in uncovering genuinely Spinozistic interests in such authors as Anthony Collins, John Toland and Denis Diderot. Moreover, *Enlightenment Contested* alleges that others, such as Giambattista Vico, may have to be included into the history of Spinozism. This historical question is interesting enough in itself, yet in *Enlightenment Contested* it is blurred by the fact that Israel insists on taking Spinozism as a monolithic system. This is a premiss no doubt essential to the project of finding the philosophical key to the 'Radical' position, but it is nevertheless a rather unworkable premiss.

[6] In *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel fights a number of other battles besides. He argues against the typical Marxist idea to reduce the course of human history to social historical concerns; against Anglo-Saxon traditions in philosophy that treat the discipline as if it were devoid of historical development; against British academic conventions that favour British republicanism and a nationalistic reading of intellectual history, and take Newtonian and British empiricist propaganda at face value; and, finally, against Postmodernists who tend to tone down the historical conflict that Israel holds to be crucial for understanding modern history in the West. Seemingly unaware of the possibility that an effort to win all of these fights may do harm to the subtlety of his own position, Israel brings himself into some intellectually precarious situations.

[7] Where, in *Radical Enlightenment*, he had argued that the initiators of the *Encyclopédie* primarily had pragmatic reasons to align themselves with ‘the philosophy of Newton and Locke’ in order to get their work published – and that eighteenth-century Anglomania in general was often inspired by religious prudence and philosophical mitigation, rather than by a simple devotion to scientific truth – the new book develops this idea in a way that combines the litmus test of atheism with the desire to outwit nationalistic historiographical tendencies. The result, however, is a very dubious presentation of the Newtonian system, which Israel holds to be a theologically biased form of natural philosophy that was mistakenly seen by many contemporaries as a better system than those of Huygens and Leibniz. Israel’s appraisals of Huygens’ wave theory of light and Leibniz’ concept of a *vis viva*, however, cannot alter the fact that the Newtonian system of the world was far superior to anything the Dutchman and the German had to offer in dynamics. To imply that Huygens was on the right track with his ongoing deterministic attempts at explaining gravity by Cartesian corpuscles, and to keep silent about the fact that Leibniz’ concept of *vis viva* was at least as metaphysically inspired as any of Newton’s own concepts, is utterly misleading, and seems to have affected Israel’s own curious reading of d’Alembert, further on in the book.

[8] A lack of philosophical acumen as well as an uncritical belief in the metaphysics of Spinozism is what foils the historian here. It is, of course, an easy mistake to present radical political insights as a necessary consequence of the metaphysical foundations on which they were first erected. In Spinoza’s case, the beauty and the cleverness of his system adds to the bewitchment. Israel regards Spinoza’s philosophy as the *real essence* of a specific philosophical view, detectable on account of its defence of materialism and ‘atheism’. Accordingly, he refuses to accept the difference between ‘loose’ and strict interpretations of Spinozism, and even seems to consider Spinoza’s system as the only true and coherent philosophy, on account of its materialism and ‘monism’. It remains a striking, but also rather discomfoting, fact that followers of Spinoza tend to take at face value the philosopher’s claim that he had solved all the riddles of earlier philosophies simply by introducing the idea of a single substance. In reality, it is his theory of ‘metaphysical monism’ that brings about most of the riddles in Spinoza’s own system. Of course, such purely philosophical issues are not necessarily relevant to the viewpoints of eighteenth-century *philosophes*, but

the fact that they are not should not make us less, but rather more suspicious of the idea that all eighteenth-century 'Radicals' shared common metaphysical views—let alone true ones.

[9] Trying to read history through the lens of an outdated deterministic position in philosophy, Israel in fact reverts to the very thing he so much lamented in Marxist-inspired versions of social history, namely, the reduction of historical developments to a supposedly inevitable process of emancipation. In practice, however, the concept of 'monism' may imply any number of things. In *Enlightenment Contested* it stands for a disbelief in the activity of spirits; a rejection of the idea that 'rights' can be explained in other ways than on the basis of political force or power-struggle; materialism; atheism; the universal equality of man; and so on. Whatever purpose it fits, 'monism', according to Israel, is the *conditio sine qua non* of a wide range of topics emerging in (early-)Enlightenment thought, from female equality to the rejection of slavery. Israel's own examples, however, refute this. In *Enlightenment Contested*, François Poulain de La Barre is presented as a leading feminist. The fact that he was a Cartesian does not bring Israel to reconsider his premisses, but occasions him to argue that De La Barre cannot have been a genuine feminist, since he was a Cartesian. Where it comes to the emancipation of slaves, there is actually no band of radical monists to be found, except for the towering figure of Franciscus van den Ende, who apparently could not even convince his own pupil Spinoza that slavery must come to an end.

[10] Thus, in Israel's latest book, exceptions gradually become the rule. The fact that Poulain de La Barre was a non-monist reformer, that the Dutch Revolution of 1747–8 was an Orangist affair, that anti-authoritarian upheavals in early-eighteenth-century Paris were basically Jansenist revolts, that a radical rationalist like Robert Challe was no Spinozist, and that the early eighteenth-century French clandestine radicals may all have detested popular prejudice, while actually disagreeing on philosophically crucial questions such as the role of religion and the metaphysics of substance, indicates how precarious it really is to suggest that there was once a coherent philosophy that engendered our 'modernist' viewpoints. Though *Enlightenment Contested*, like *Radical Enlightenment* will for many years remain an invaluable source of historical information concerning eighteenth-century Diderot-like brands of *Spinozisme*, the book fails to prove its point, viz. that a single philosophy changed mental attitudes and that anti-authoritarianism, monism, atheism and sexual and political freedoms always come together. Putting aside the difficult question whether we should count Bayle amongst the non-believers, there is in any case no reason to count him amongst the advocates of democratic rule. The case of Hobbes, who combined a supposed atheism with reactionary ideas in politics, occasions an even more formidable example of an exception to a rule that should never have been a rule for reading European history in the first place.

[11] Though ideas may have their impact, and though they may represent the beliefs of the generation that held them, history shows no loyalty to specific intellectual positions. Even if it were true that there once was (or still is) a uniquely scientific philosophy that accords to what we now believe to be acceptable and

‘enlightened’ views, neither a ‘modern’ philosophical view nor a ‘modern’ political outcome necessarily results from the activity of the philosopher who first advocated it. Ideas may convince, but as Spinoza’s case proves, they may also shock and change opinion in curiously contingent ways. I believe it is fair to say that, over the last half millennium, philosophers and scientists have indeed fought important battles against authoritarian rule and against superstitious interpretations of accepted religion. The intellectual history of Modern Europe is nevertheless far too complicated to be reduced to the advance of Spinozism. Are we to ignore the cultural relevance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s later intellectual development? Are we to deplore Hume’s subtle scepticism, because it did not fit Spinoza’s metaphysical rigour? Do we find a contradiction in the fact that Montesquieu was a conservative, despite having read Spinoza?

<sup>[12]</sup> Curiously, while arguing that it was a version of Radical thought that shaped the better part of our modern values, Israel confesses that he does not care very much for our present-day values. Praising Diderot’s effort to enlighten the general public, Israel adds a pessimistic note about how Radical zeal has been wasted, since promoting equality of knowledge and understanding ‘was a stance wholly remote from present-day society’s adulation of the common, the ordinary, and the popular in terms of both taste and opinion’ (p. 567). Supposedly regrettable aspects of modernity, however, should also be taken into account if we aim at a comprehensive view of our modern intellectual make-up. Later Romantic contributions may have influenced our understanding of ourselves in other relevant ways, just as surely as pre-Enlightenment morality had its impact. The notion of equality, for instance, may well be linked to European religious convictions, as well as to eighteenth-century Radical views. If one were to search for the origins of early modern claims against authoritarian rule, it is likely that Christian ideas would be found to offer equal or even better candidates than secularised or atheistic ideas concerning human conduct and social behaviour. Christian ideas may also have been of greater influence in the formation of Western morality than the claims philosophers made against the clergy or the state. When Spinoza’s own teacher, the ‘Catholic schoolmaster’ Franciscus van den Ende, was convicted of treason in 1674, he had to suffer unspeakable agonies in the name of authoritarian rule. Amongst other atrocities done to him in Louis XIV’s torture chambers during the night before he was hanged, his knees were slowly dislocated. What ideas might have prevented this ugly scene? If a philosopher’s arguments could have saved our Flemish democrat, who would not have called for an Erasmus in preference to a Machiavelli, for a Rousseau, perhaps, but not for Hobbes?