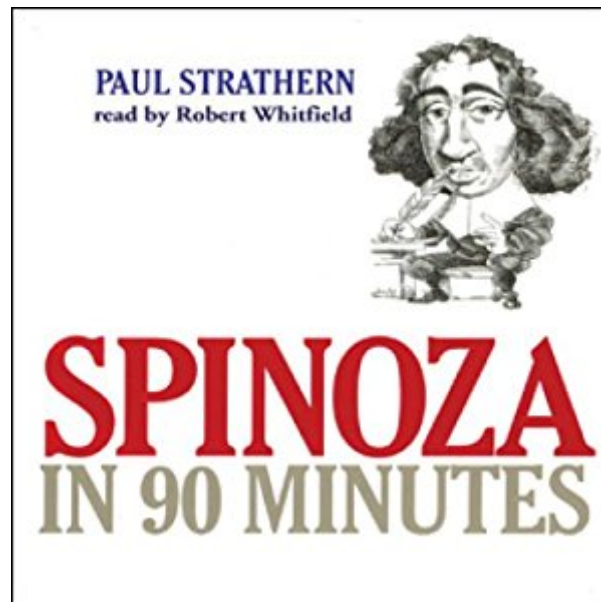




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Spinoza In 90 Minutes



Synopsis

Spinoza's brilliant metaphysical system was derived neither from reality nor experience. Starting from basic assumptions, with a series of geometric proofs he built a universe which was also God--one and the same thing, the classic example of pantheism. Although his system seems an oddity today, Spinoza's conclusions are deeply in accord with modern thought, from science (the holistic ethics of today's ecologists) to politics (the idea that the state exists to protect the individual). Both Spinoza's system and conclusions have compelling beauty unequaled in the history of philosophy. In *Spinoza in 90 Minutes*, Paul Strathern offers a concise, expert account of Spinoza's life and ideas and explains their influence on man's struggle to understand his existence in the world. The book also includes selections from Spinoza's work, a brief list of suggested readings for those who wish to delve deeper, and chronologies that place Spinoza within his own age and in the broader scheme of philosophy. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Great!

Not well written, and written with a kind of vulgar mechanicalness, I really can't recommend this book to any subset of general readership. After reading this, I don't think I know much more about Spinoza than I already had, which was little enough that a book of this sort, performing its function properly, should have augmented and supplemented my knowledge in some way. The book felt like an essay off-the-cuff that took less than 90 minutes to write. If anything, the good thing I can say is

that Strathern writes with an attitudinal style that makes for an engaging read, supposing the lack of commas doesn't agitate you, as it did me. Instead, I recommend Scruton's "Very Short Introduction to Spinoza," which, while not being ideal, is a considerable improvement over this book. If "Spinoza in 90 minutes" is all you have access to, and know nothing about Spinoza, then, maybe, it is okay to read; but, in all other circumstances, I just suggest reading something (anything) else on Spinoza.

Highly readable and very approachable, true of each volume in this series. This book, as well as the entire series, is light in terms philosophical exposition but highly readable and makes a good introduction as well as a good source for historical context and personal stories. In being so thin a volume, which is at once the greatest virtue and greatest vice of this book, there is not much to review or there is simply too much to be said about what is not said. I have thus presented one key take away from the book in the title to this review: God is nature and nature is the sum total of reality, nature is deterministic.

Baruch Spinoza, is a man from my own heart, "the philosopher's philosopher:" a born iconoclast -- at a time when being one was worth something. In fact being one could (and often did) cost one his life. Born into a Portuguese-Jewish "con-verso" family that had fled Spain to the Netherlands during the inquisition, the young Spinoza, cared as little about Judaism as he did about the Catholicism he and his family had been forced to convert to. However, being clever, his way out of having to deal with the problem of religion was to use his mind, through philosophy: If God is the master of the universe, as all religions claim, then just what sort of world does having such a dominant supreme being entail logically? What sort of world follows logically from such a universal premise? Maybe God is all there is? Maybe the whole universe is just God and there is nothing else? Maybe the only substance in the universe is "God-substance?" Beginning with this as his only premise, and turning this religious axiom on its head, Spinoza developed a Euclidian framework of the universe, proceeding deductively from religious first principle -- that if God does indeed exist, and is indeed "all-seeing and all-knowing and all-powerful, etc." and following this logic to its conclusion -- just what kind of world must this necessarily entail? His conclusion, using Euclid's geometric methodology, and boot-strapping his way logically from a single axiom about God's existence, to a full-fledged logically closed and consistent philosophy, was that, the only possible world was one in which God is the only substance: A pantheistic universe of wholeness in which the primary law is the conservation of "God-energy." As it turned out, Spinoza's God was indeed a pantheistic God: God was the universe and everything within it. God and his extension (and their transmutations, us),

were the only substances. But unfortunately for him, Spinoza's God necessarily turned out to be a rather impersonal God, not the famous and ultimate "Big Brother" in the sky God, attentively watching over his weaker flock. No, Spinoza's proof of God showed that a God-driven world necessarily had to be one in which He (God) was the only energy or connective tissue in an otherwise cold impersonal and logically driven universe. Thus, in one fell-swoop, Spinoza's God-world, solved a host of other philosophical problems such as Descartes' "Mind-Body" problem. Since "Mind and Body," like Einstein's "Space-Time," was a single dimension and continuum, God's thought and its extension in Spinoza's world, constituted the order and connection of ideas as well as the order and connection of things: Cause and effect thus were linked as rigidly and as irreversibly as the processes of reason. In Spinoza's God-World, God's existence is posited as the only necessary and sufficient condition. Everything else followed naturally, logically, and geometrically through reason, mathematics and rational experiments, where number is equivalent to prayer. Through Spinoza's philosophical system, Descartes rationalism was brought to its epitome and lasted until it was replaced by the Empiricists and logical positivism. Naively, Spinoza thought that the Jewish Church hierarchy would be delighted with his discovery. However, they were not amused, and summarily excommunicated him from the Temple as a heathen and a heretic. And although Spinoza's ideas also were eventually severely criticized by establishment philosophers on more analytic grounds, its innovative qualities were never doubted or belittled. In passing, one would be remiss not to mention that Eastern religions have long used Spinoza's grand premise -- that any God-driven universe must be one whole continuous system, and that God-substance necessarily is all there is (or can be!); that we are just God-energy walking and talking -- as their foundation principle as well. It is worth noting too that the new quantum ideas of wholeness, especially those espoused by the late Quantum Physicist, Professor David Bohm's ideas of an "Implicate Order," resonate well with Spinoza's ideas. Three stars

~f~ ~ ~ "Hello, my name is Baruch and I was a cancer sufferer.~f~ ~ ~ ~ So would say Spinoza if he could speak to us today. The cancer is rationalism and most of us, including yours truly, would have made the same admission. Paul Strathern gives a good accounting of Spinoza~f~ ~ ~ ~, his life and works as part of his ~f~ ~ ~ ~ "In 90 Minutes~f~ ~ ~ ~ audio series but, as with most works produced in the West, it slants toward the rationalist worldview (calls Torah learning ~f~ ~ ~ ~ "boring~f~ ~ ~ ~) that Spinoza did so much to create. ~f~ ~ ~ ~ "Spinoza in 90 Minutes~f~ ~ ~ ~ could be taken as a circular ~f~ ~ ~ ~ "proof~f~ ~ ~ ~ of Spinoza~f~ ~ ~ ~ ~

greatness. Orthodox Judaism today embraces the rationalism of Maimonides (name mispronounced on the CD) because he used the methods of the Greeks to fashion pearl handles for Israel to get a firmer grasp of Torah. The great Rabbeinu Yonah (The Gates of Repentance) recognized this and went from critic to champion of Maimonides. Spinoza read Maimonides but used rationalism to fashion iron skis (or perhaps it was lenses) to travel down the slippery slope. Thus Spinoza got himself kicked out of the Amsterdam kehillah (Strathern's explanation includes an irony) and set himself on course to join that group of keen wordsmiths that died at 44 (F. Scott Fitzgerald is also a member of the club). Spinoza's involvement in the business world (not touched upon by Strathern) was a precursor to the Enlightenment when money began to supplant religious piety as the chief qualification for leadership in Jewish communities and elsewhere. Someone should really rewrite the penultimate chapter of F.A. Hayek's Road to Serfdom. Why the worst get on top, Hayek opined. My rewrite: "For your answer start with the Enlightenment and proceed to industrialism." As Strathern relates, Spinoza wrote penetratingly (pardon the pun) on love and desire including the sexual variants of these. But Spinoza declared everything to be holy so his system is a dead end. In the grip of sexual lust? Greed? Why not try a bit of holiness? No can do since everything is holy and the Torah is (chashalom) a fake, Baruch's system tells us. It was quite a leap of faith to reckon the Torah a product of men. Didn't he learn any of the codings? Rabbis like Manasseh ben Israel lived in Holland and were great inspirations. It was a sad life Spinoza made for himself. Like other liberal Jews down through the centuries, Spinoza believed what he wanted to believe and was too clever by half. Spinoza's pantheistic intellectual love of G-d/universe did produce some ideas that, at least on the surface, weren't totally rotten. His political theory was ahead of his time and ours. Yet his liberal theory leaves us open to the cultural toxic waste dumpers of our day that he didn't imagine in his. Everything's holy? "The Walking Dead" holy? Yeah, right. "The Ethics," Spinoza's master work, probably did more than any philosophy book to stick us with the mathematization of everything complex which helped create the cults of "science" and "experts." Strathern reports that the book is unreadable but somebody must have read it because its call of the wild is heard all over our cultural landscape. Or perhaps its dissemination is just the yetzer ha-ra (evil

inclination) traveling along on Spinoza's skis. I had been wondering what got Spinoza excommunicated and now I know. Thank you, Mr. Strathern. And thank you, Mr. Spinoza, for leaving wise and religious people of all stripes so much work to undo.

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