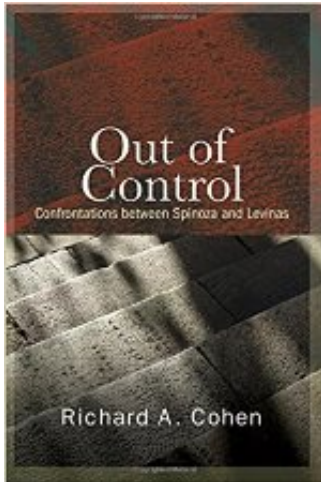




Out of Control: Confrontations between Spinoza and Levinas



Michael Miller | 01.12.2017

Richard A. Cohen:

Out of Control: Confrontations between Spinoza and Levinas.

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This book takes as its thesis that Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Levinas stand at opposite poles. The span in question is that which goes from science to humanism, and which includes within it religion. In Richard A. Cohen's bifurcation, Spinoza is avatar of totality and necessity, Levinas of difference and freedom. And it is this that guides the title: *Out of Control*, the "control" of Spinoza's totalitarian cosmos, total rationality; the unified everything which also conditions scientism and dogmatic politics, and which Levinas seeks to breach with his emphasis on the phenomenological transcendence of human individuality.

Cohen leads us through debates on the nature and meaning of the body (chapter 1), prophetic speech (chapter 2), the love of God and its remuneration (chapter 3), justice and the state (chapter 4), Judaism (chapter 6), and the effects of the awareness of mortality on morality (chapter 7), along with discussions of the intended audience of the 1670 *Theological-Political Treatise* (chapter 5) and Spinoza's dismissiveness toward common folk (chapter 8). From the outset, Cohen is clear which side of this confrontation he favors. Spinoza, for Cohen, suffered from two major errors: philosophical positivism (ascribing science has much more value than is realistic); and philosophical idealism (hoping that science might provide exactly the kind of eternal truths that it should have effectively destroyed).

Although Spinoza features in every chapter while Levinas is in only six of the eight (plus the supporting characters of Friedrich Nietzsche, Maimonides, and Martin Heidegger), in these latter six, Spinoza—or Spinozism—appears as the foil against which Cohen establishes the merits of Levinasian religious humanism. Perhaps this is to be expected—it is the common dynamic when a fashionable near-contemporary philosopher is pitted against a now slightly fusty classic. The terms of modern philosophical thought intrinsically favor the former, even if this is partly because the influence of the latter has so informed—and altered—our paradigm that we can no longer see its need or benefit.

Some of Cohen's chapters are potent investigations, intriguing either for their scholarly reaching for answers about Spinoza's political cynicism or for their distillation of philosophical approaches, their explication of particulars such as Levinas's phenomenological base, or the importance of polyphonic Talmudic reasoning. Others appear as rehearsed polemic, simplistic rejection of a view that is only present in order to be rejected—only described in order to support its counter.

So, when Levinas and Spinoza-Nietzsche debate the nature and meaning of the body, immediately they differ: Nietzsche's is celebratory, sensing power and life; Levinas's is cautious, recognizing vulnerability and spontaneity. Levinas believes in responsiveness to the other and their needs, Nietzsche hates pity. In castigating Nietzsche's "adolescent perspective," reactionary and angrily selfish, Cohen engages in mere value judgment, grounded in a rejection of the founding principles of both Spinozism and Nietzscheanism (pp. 54-55). It is a weak attack, one that does not take Nietzsche's own position seriously or generously. Cohen here begs the question, and though he does so sincerely, if we are looking for an authentic philosophical—rather than an emotional—response to Nietzsche, this does not cut the mustard.

At other times, Cohen's argument is much stronger. When discussing social organization, the state, and the human striving for justice, he builds a careful case that those who claim Spinoza advocates democracy misunderstand him. Spinoza advocates calm, fearing above all the chaos that comes with changing between systems of social organization. Spinoza's prime desire is that philosophy and science are left alone to pursue their goals; the mass of people will not and cannot understand this, and neither should their lives or quality of living matter beyond minimizing the disruption they will cause if abused too openly. Justice is not an a priori goal for Spinoza—although, the appearance of it is certainly useful.

Most interesting, perhaps, is when the two philosophers are not pitted against each other. The love of God, properly executed, must expect nothing: there are no rewards, not even reciprocal love. Spinoza bases his claim on the identification of will with intellect and then with the natural world, as the manifestation of rational principles. To desire that God loves one back is desire for God not to be God, i.e., to destroy Him. "Loving God" must be an active process, one of becoming like God, in growing knowledge of the truths that constitute Him, through the "participation in the perfect intellectual activity of mind" (p. 87). Levinas rejects the identification of will and intellect, emphasizing independent, transcendent subjectivity. The pathos of the human explodes idealism's logic; the architecture cannot withstand this volcano.

It is this question of subjectivity that forms the fulcrum of the philosophers' disagreement. For the monist Spinoza, subjectivity is always totalized by reason, is ultimately in itself nothing. For Levinas, it is not a deficient version of truth/reality, but is entirely its own thing. Indeed, the rational-intelligible only comes about as a result of the subjective encounter with an Other who irrevocably transcends us, and must neither be reduced into the will, nor given to consume it—the intelligible is intelligible only via ethical behavior. And therefore, it MUST admit the validity of sense on its own terms.

Cohen's general problem with Spinoza, often unstated but subtly present through most chapters' critique, is that he does not take Jewish thought seriously. If only Spinoza had incorporated the rabbinic *Weltanschauung*, then he would have approached this issue in a much more mature manner. This is emphasized in chapter 6, "Levinas on Spinoza's Misunderstanding of Judaism." Supporting Levinas's critique with other scholars, Cohen finds Spinoza ultimately deficient in Talmudic wisdom, perhaps because of his Marrano background which cut generations of his family off from Jewish learning and thought, leaving only the Christianized picture of Jewish religion.

To negate "the transcendence of God, truth in history, the exceptional status of the human soul, and the independence and efficacy of morality and justice," as Spinoza does, constitutes "an attack on Judaism" of even the most minimally coherent kind (p. 194). I would have liked to see some

reference here to Mordecai Kaplan, the modern theologian who reread Judaism through Spinozism in order to create a quintessentially modern outlook which was still no less religious, and which still provided for the sacredness of the human "soul." For, if we admit that religious tradition is open to reform and must move with the times, then we should surely apply the same generosity to philosophical systems, and allow them to evolve and embrace new concepts, such as humanism.

And so Cohen's book presents a subtle argument for the particularity of contemporary Levinas, who rebels against the individualism of late capitalist Europe, over the attempted universalism of Spinoza's pre-Enlightenment Europe. Spinoza was at the beginning of science, as one of the first to realize its import, "one of the first to take and to think seriously" about it (p. 1); given where it has led us and having altered our world completely, radically, from medieval premodern times, he may have a lot to teach us about ourselves and the world we live in. This is to say that he knew science and the world before they became one. Levinas, on the other hand, living in the era of the Holocaust, totalism, and the manifold struggles of contemporary humanity, bears witness to the consequences of scientism and the denial of an overriding concern for individual human beings. Perhaps then, there is a missed opportunity in this text: surely there would be a way of resolving these difficulties, of allowing for a scientific though not scientific philosophy, an outlook that would promote both the value of empirical, peer-reviewed enquiry and human life, subjectivity and objectivity equally. For, though the world may be rational, it exists for us within our experience as living beings, and this experience is shot through with irrationality.

This is an incisive, deep analysis of two philosophers, offering important critiques of Spinoza in particular; its thinking points about different ways of prioritizing such issues as the state, human relations, the body, and religion are potent and vital, from which many readers will benefit. Its flaws, such that there are some, are firstly in the clear bias and the fact the book is presented as a dialogue while it has a clear favorite; and secondly that it does champion one rather than synthesizing a new way forward.

Editorial remarks

Michael Miller is a lecturer in Jewish Studies and Philosophy (at Liverpool Hope University and University of Chester), and Religion and Theology editor for the early-career journal "Harts and Minds". His research focuses on Jewish thought from the Second Temple Period to the medieval Kabbalah, as well as modern Jewish philosophy, and his published output covers both historical and philosophical perspectives.

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