

# Philosophy for revolution Session 7: Scandalous thinkers

## Session 6 Spinoza and Descartes

### Slide 1:

Hello again!

In this session we'll look at the tumultuous 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thinkers about philosophy, religion, and science – which in those times were all studied together – began to view things in a new way. Looking beyond the closed world of the medieval church, notions of natural law, consciousness and human individuality emerged.

During this period a new class, the bourgeoisie –also known as the capitalist class – gained increasing influence, in the Netherlands, and later England. These were revolutions; both **religious AND social**. In those times, almost all philosophy was seen through the prism of religion.

The notion of a sun-centred (as opposed to earth-centred) universe upset the notion of an eternal power hierarchy, in which God ruled at the top, followed by Church and Monarch, with ordinary people at the very bottom

So, over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the old model of society and way of thinking was challenged in a fundamental way. This period can be described as the beginning of what some call “modernity”, or as a precursor to the Age of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

But, as we shall see, there was conflict, and considerable suffering, as individuals who thought the unthinkable clashed with ideological power holders. Indeed, merely suggesting that the universe was infinite could lead to harsh persecution and even death.

In the previous session we saw how Scottish, German, and English thinkers rediscovered the real world of nature and society in the late Middle Ages. But now, we will focus on how the 17<sup>th</sup> century became a veritable battlefield of ideas. Indeed, some of the thinkers we are about to meet, had to roam far and wide, from Rome to France and England and even to Sweden, in search of safety.

It's perhaps difficult for us today to grasp how dangerous it could be to challenge established powers in writing, lecturing, and preaching, and even private conversations! The ruling establishments did eventually absorb the ideas and scientific discoveries of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the daring approach of some key thinkers can still provide inspiration for us today.

We'll look at two major philosophers - Rene Descartes and Benedict Spinoza - who have exercised an important influence on the evolution of modern thought. They can be seen as symbolising quite opposite outlooks – dualism and monism. And yet both came into conflict with prevailing ideologies.

### Slide 2:

In 1600, only four years before Descartes was born, a Dominican friar called Giordano Bruno, was burnt at the stake by the Roman inquisition. Today, his statue (on the right in this slide) looms over a marketplace in Rome, a gathering point for freethinkers and political activists.

Bruno had sought protection from the Roman Inquisition as he wandered from Italy to Switzerland, France, and England. He gave lectures on cosmology in Oxford in 1583, in which he anticipated the ideas of Galileo. His view that the universe was infinite, composed of a single substance but populated by many worlds, caused him to be excommunicated by both Catholic and Protestant churches. On the eve of his execution in Rome, after a trial lasting for an incredible seven years, he said to the judges, with astonishing courage: “Perhaps your fear in passing judgment on me is greater than mine in receiving it.”

## Philosophy for revolution Session 7: Scandalous thinkers

Descartes began his education in a Roman Catholic school run by Jesuit priests. But he was soon troubled by uncertainty. The perfect world that religious authorities asserted that God had created was not as described. The Italian astronomer Galileo was seeing things in his telescope which shattered old beliefs.

### Slide 3:

Descartes moved to the Netherlands which was a haven of tolerance, having thrown off the yoke of Roman Catholic absolutism **in a war with Spain lasting 80 years.**

In the newly independent Netherlands, Article 13 of the Union of Utrecht, decreed that: "every individual should remain free in his religion and no man should be molested or questioned on the subject of divine worship."

So, it was in the largely protestant Netherlands that a scientist philosopher like Descartes (a Catholic) and Benedict Spinoza (who we will meet soon) could live in relative safety to write and discuss their ideas.

Slide 4: But In France and Italy, the inquisition was seeking out heretics. Giordano Bruno was not the last to suffer. Another martyr was Lucilio Vanini a freethinking philosopher who sought refuge in England at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But on his return to France in 1619, the Parliament of Toulouse sentenced him to death by strangulation. He was then burnt at the stake, aged 33.

### Slide 5:

Descartes developed a "dualist" approach. In his view, human beings were divided into a **material physiology** and an **immaterial soul**. He saw mind and body as distinct things, two different substances. The mind, he thought, was not located in space whereas the body occupied space.

"Dualism" is the doctrine that, in contrast to Monism, regards material and spiritual substances as equal and separate principles. It is often invoked in attempts to reconcile materialism and idealism, and the separation of consciousness, or mind, from matter.

In 1630, Descartes moved to Amsterdam, but even there he suppressed his own writings. In his book, *The World*, he assumed the same sun-centred model that had already infuriated the Catholic church. It was the very year that Galileo had to appear before the Inquisition in Italy.

In 1637, Descartes **did** go on to publish his *Optics, Meteorology, and Geometry* in which he developed his "doctrine of clear and distinct ideas." This held that an idea was clear if one could be sure about what the idea was, and distinct, if it was different from other ideas.

~~Marx described the contradiction in Descartes' philosophy as follows: "Descartes, in his physics, endowed matter with creative power and conceived mechanical motion as its manifestation of life. Within his physics, matter is the only substance, the only reason of its existence and cognition."~~

Descartes contributed to the development of modern science with his discovery of analytical geometry. His dualist and mechanistic image of the world became widespread. The English physicist and mathematician, Isaac Newton, embraced Descartes' ideas about gravity and planetary motion and developed his own law of universal gravity, which revolutionised physics.

Descartes felt that one thing was certain: "I think therefore I am". This became one of the most famous statements in philosophy.

## Philosophy for revolution Session 7: Scandalous thinkers

He meant it as a self-evident truth that can be relied on. He proposed that truth existed and that true statements were in principle possible. He sought to establish truth by reasoning, beginning with the simplest proposition, and then building on it by degrees. Defining the “knowing subject” – ourselves - as the source of certainty made him a pioneer who still influences modern philosophy.

Tensions mounted between Descartes and the theological establishment in the northern Dutch town where he was staying and he felt increasingly unsafe. After an offer from Queen Christina of Sweden, he moved to her court, where he died within a year, probably of the cold, just before his 54<sup>th</sup> birthday. These portraits show Descartes on the left and Christina on the right.

Descartes legacy is summed up well by Kurt Smith:

“... the mind–body problem persists. In distinguishing the domain of the mental from that of the physical, Descartes struck a chord. Many philosophers accept the conceptual distinction but remain uncertain of the underlying metaphysics: whether mind is identical with brain; or the mental emerges from complex processes in the brain; or constitutes a property that is different from any purely physical property, even while being instantiated by the brain. In this case, a problem that Descartes made prominent has lived far beyond his proposed solution.”

### Slide 6

Benedict, or Baruch, Spinoza, a Sephardic Jew, lived in Amsterdam. The Netherlands had recently liberated itself from Catholic Spain as we saw a few moments ago. Born in 1632, he was excommunicated by the Jewish community at the age of 23 for “evil opinions and acts... and abominable heresies”.

It was the harshest writ of “herem”, a form of excommunication, ever pronounced on a member of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam.

It may seem hard to believe, but in 2013, some 360 years later, the Portuguese Jewish community decided NOT to revoke the “herem” of Spinoza!

But it was not only his own Jewish community that opposed Spinoza’s teachings. He had to publish his first major work anonymously due to fears of a reaction from the ruling Calvinist authorities. The only book he could ever publish, his *Theological-Political Treatise*, was denounced as the most dangerous book ever published: it was said to be “forged in hell... by the devil himself”.

### Slide 7

So, what was so shocking about his ideas? Spinoza regarded both mind and matter as simply aspects or attributes of the eternal, infinite and unique *substance* he identified with God Himself.

Thus, Spinoza solved the conundrum that Descartes posed so sharply. Instead of separating mind from matter, Spinoza saw everything as part of a whole – Nature and God as one – this was his “Monism” - that there is only one kind of ultimate substance.

“Monism” is the outlook that underlying all existence is one source – for materialists that is matter: for idealists it’s the spirit.

With Spinoza, the single substance is Nature, which he said, is the “cause of itself”. No external power or “metaphysics” was needed. Thus, he cut Descartes’ “Gordian knot” of philosophy, otherwise known as the relationship between mind and matter, thought and the body, the physical

## Philosophy for revolution Session 7: Scandalous thinkers

and the psychological. And thereby, he brilliantly reunited human beings with nature and their own thoughts.

### Slide 8

It may well have been Spinoza's denial that there is an immortal self that persists after death which caused such a ruckus. As Spinoza scholar Stephen Nadler describes it:

"The free person understands that there is no afterlife, no postmortem realm of reward or punishment, no 'world to come'. When a person dies, there is for that person, nothing.

According to informants working for, **wait for it!, the Spanish Inquisition (which you never know when to expect!)**, Spinoza told some visitors to Amsterdam that one of the reasons for his expulsion from the Jewish community was that he said to some friends that "the soul dies with the body".

But he also wrote in his Ethics that:

"The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains that is eternal". It remains an eternal idea in God or Nature under the attribute of thought. To use Spinoza's beautiful phrase the mind **does** continue: "under the aspect of eternity".

### Slide 9:

Enlightenment historian, Jonathan Israel, has compared the denunciation of "Spinozism" during the philosopher's own lifetime to Western Cold War anti-communism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Spinoza's radicalism, in Israel's view, was simultaneously theological and political. He sees him as one of the foremost proponents of freedom of thought and expression in his age.

This is what Israel writes:

"By the mid-1670s Spinoza stood at the head of an underground radical philosophical movement rooted in the Netherlands but decidedly European in scope. His books were illegal but, paradoxically, excepting only Descartes, no other contemporary thinker had enjoyed, over the previous quarter of a century, so wide a European reception, even if in his case that reception was overwhelmingly (though far from exclusively) hostile."

In Spinoza's view, humans are part of "**processes**" in nature. Our everyday acts are made necessary by the laws of thought "as bodies in motion are by the laws of physics". But this does not stop us from seeking well-being or "flourishing" or "happiness". His view of a free person is that of being an active and self-governing agent. The free person is in control of her life. She will be guided from within, by knowledge and reason rather than passion or imagination.

### Slide 10.

Spinoza and Descartes belong to the beginnings of the "age of reason", given that they stressed the importance of rational human thought, and the possibility of understanding the world.

### Slide 11.

More recently, Spinoza's thought has inspired several revolutionary thinkers. They include the Soviet oppositional Marxist, Evald Ilyenkov. In his book *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov summarised Spinoza's great contribution as follows:

## Philosophy for revolution Session 7: Scandalous thinkers

“It is not a special ‘soul’, installed by God in the human body as in a temporary residence, that thinks, but the **body of man** itself. **Thought** is a property, a mode of existence, of the body, the same as its extension, that is, as its spatial configuration and position among other bodies.”

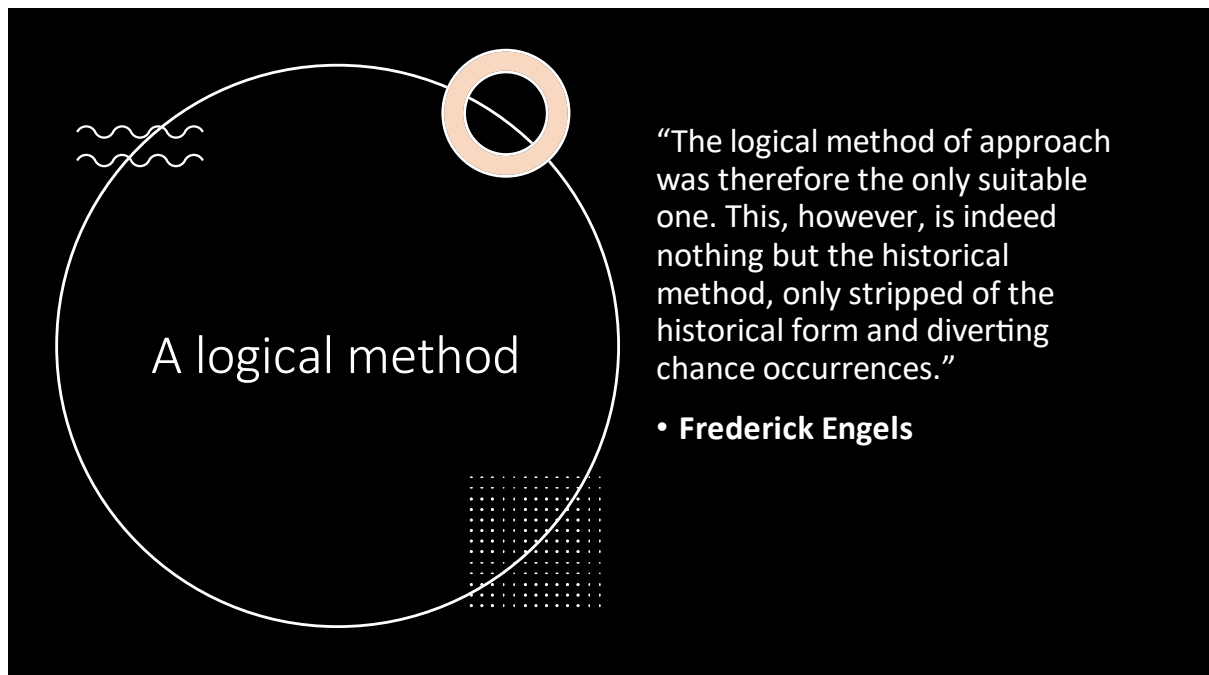
Toni Negri, the Italian political philosopher who founded the Autonomous independent trade union movement in Italy, took inspiration from Spinoza. In the 1970s, Negri was sentenced to 34 years in jail by the Italian state, having been falsely accused of supporting terrorism. Negri wrote a book of Spinoza studies while in prison. Later, he co-authored the book “Empire”, published in 2000, where he theorised the concept of “multitude” from Spinoza. His ideas became associated with the global Occupy movement.

Spinoza’s thought continues to have a massive influence on contemporary thinkers and activists in the fields of ethics and human development, activity theory and concepts of the thinking body.

Slide 12.

I’m looking forward to seeing you in the next session where we travel to Germany to discover a new resurgence of Enlightenment ideas – and the controversial figure of Hegel.

=====



A logical method

“The logical method of approach was therefore the only suitable one. This, however, is indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences.”

• **Frederick Engels**