

3. POPKIN'S SPINOZA

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Among philosophers, Spinoza has the unusual fortune that his philosophical pre-eminence is more than matched by a strong non-philosophical following. Notwithstanding the austere, not to say forbidding, analytic rigor of his deductive arguments in his *Ethics*, he is in danger of becoming everybody's favorite philosopher: recognised internationally as a member of the canon of great philosophers; claimed by the Dutch as the foremost Dutch philosopher; seized on by feminists for disposing of the mind-body dichotomy, and as a philosopher of the emotions;¹ lauded by liberal historians as the origin of modern democratic values and the true father of secular enlightenment;² accommodated to Judaism, even if still branded a heretic;³ imagined, historically, as a kind of *Socrates redivivus*, who set himself above the bigotry and back-biting of his age, to lead a life of isolated tranquillity, live his philosophy⁴ – the list is as variegated as it extensive.

Richard Popkin's interest in Spinoza was primarily philosophical. He cast a healthily skeptical eye on the convergence of contradictions that make up Spinoza's latter-day image. Yet he was, at the same time, receptive to many aspects of Spinoza's life and writings which lie beyond the reach of philosophical

¹See, for example, Genevieve Lloyd, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Spinoza and the Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²Jonathan Israel, *The Radical Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); idem, *Enlightenment Contested* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³Stephen Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and the Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁴Johannes Colerus, *Korte, dog waaragtige Levensbeschrijving, van Benedictus de Spinoza* (Amsterdam 1705), translated into French and English the following year. An example of a modern hagiographic view of Spinoza, see Romain Rolland, *Empédocle d'Agrigente suivi de l'éclair Spinoza* (Paris, 1931), who regarded Spinoza's writings as "à l'égal des Livres Saints pour qu'on croix en eux." As cited in item 194 of the catalogue of the exhibition, *Spinoza. Troisième centenaire de la mort du Philosophe* (Paris: Institut Néerlandais, 1977).

analysis. Popkin's philosophical interest in Spinoza was not, therefore, without its own contradictions. Spinoza was, in his assessment, "an epistemological dogmatist," who did not see skepticism as "the specter haunting European philosophy".⁵ Yet Spinoza figures in his *History of Scepticism* (in editions published from 1979). Consequently Spinoza is in many ways the odd philosopher out in the Popkinian emphasis on the skeptical strand in the history of philosophy. This alone is enough to make Popkin's Spinoza something of a paradox. But there are further paradoxes in the Popkinian account: Spinoza the "super-rationalist" indebted to kabbalism; a Jewish thinker to be understood in terms of Christian thought; a serious bible-scholar who destroyed the truth claims of religion. To most modern readers these appear irreconcilable contradictions, best avoided.⁶ To Richard Popkin, the seeming contradictions were a challenge. He sought to understand the basis of the claims about his subject and to understand how they interconnect. This was not the result of uncritical credulity, nor an attempt to reconcile interpreters. Rather, it was the outcome of a thorough study of Spinoza's life and work. It also, as I shall argue a little later, owed not a little to Popkin's own skepticism. In the final analysis, these disparate aspects of Spinoza hang together – the light Popkin sheds on Spinoza by exploring these apparently disparate strands vindicates his approach.

Spinoza first figures in Popkin's published writings in 1979, with the first expanded edition of his *History of Scepticism*. The extended chronological scope of the study is reflected in its full title: *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Spinoza continued to occupy a significant place in the Popkinian canon of interests, right up to the end of his publishing career: one of his last published books was his *Spinoza* for Oneworld Publications in 2004. This is not to say that Spinoza interested him *only* in the latter part of his career. In fact, Spinoza is present from the very beginning in his earliest work on the history of philosophy: it was on the skepticism of Pierre Bayle, that Popkin cut his historical teeth, and as I shall argue later, there is a direct link between Popkin's interest in Spinoza and his interest in Bayle. As Popkin's research developed, Spinoza came to occupy a more central place in Popkin's work: a chapter on Spinoza was added to the expanded edition of *The History of Scepticism* in 1979, and there is no question that Spinoza was a major interest during the remainder of Popkin's life. From the time when the chapter on Spinoza was added to *The History of Scepticism*, Popkin's view of Spinoza remained

⁵Popkin, *History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 251.

⁶An exception is Margaret Wilson who acknowledges the combination of new and old traceable in Spinoza's philosophy. Nevertheless, she describes them as "bizarre," in *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 89.

essentially unchanged. Spinoza occupies a key place in *The History of Scepticism*, not because he was a paradigmatic skeptic or anti-skeptic, but because of his importance for understanding how skepticism itself transformed from being a tool of philosophical dialectic to acquiring its modern anti-religious significance. Spinoza's destruction of the scriptural basis of religious truth in *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, struck at the very roots of Christianity, especially Protestantism which had such a huge investment in scripture as the rule of faith. Spinoza the modern bible-critic is not directly part of the history of philosophical skepticism, but it was Spinoza's critique of the bible (by ruthless application of the critical tools of rational humanism) which produced this skeptical result. Although quickly branded an atheist, Spinoza appeared to be immune from skeptical attack. In essentials, the account of Spinoza in the *History of Scepticism* is retained in Popkin's last book on Spinoza. The main difference between the two studies is the amount of circumstantial detail about Spinoza's life, work and reputation that Popkin distilled into this last work. Although a slim volume, it is the product of half a lifetime's scholarship, its richness disproportionate to its brevity.

Spinoza was not just a continuous interest throughout Popkin's working life, but he is a key point of intersection for the many strands of Popkin's intellectual odyssey. So many of the areas of scholarship in which he distinguished himself come together in his work on Spinoza: the history of skepticism, the relationship of philosophy and religion, the history of Judaism, millenarianism, Jewish-Christian relations, bible scholarship. The book on Spinoza confirms that, far from being the odd-man-out of Popkin's philosophical and historical interests, Spinoza is emblematic of those interests. In fact, one of the few topics among Popkin's scholarly interests which has no direct link to Spinoza is Isaac Newton. Of course, Newton and Spinoza were in so many ways the polar opposites, not least in their attitude to scripture. Unlike Spinoza, Newton accepted the truth of revealed religion (even if he thought most religions got it wrong). Nevertheless, as Popkin recognised, despite their different assessments of both scripture and religious belief, both these topics are relevant of to the concerns of both men. This itself is an important point of interconnection between the two. Both were close students of the text of the bible, and for each, his conception of God was integrally linked to his understanding of the universe. This point of interconnection is the organising principle of *The Books of Scripture and the Books of Nature*, which Popkin edited with James Force, where Spinoza and Newton figure as twin poles of bible scholarship.⁷

⁷ *The Books of Scripture and the Books of Nature. Recent Essays on the Theology and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza's Time and in the British Isles of Newton's Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994).

History of Philosophy

Popkin's Spinoza is the product of a particular way of investigating the history of thought. In important ways his study of Spinoza represents what Richard Popkin stood for as a historian of philosophy. As Allison Coudert explains in her broader discussion in this volume, Popkin was not the adherent of a narrowly defined method, but rather the product of a particular, twentieth-century intellectual tradition. In his approach to the philosophical history Popkin was certainly not a "method" man and he never formulated a methodology. Nevertheless, his approach to the subject had its methodological distinctiveness, in so far as it entailed particular kinds of question and a broad latitude in the kinds of materials he considered relevant to his enquiries. From the very beginning, Popkin made no assumptions about modernity or what makes philosophy interesting. He also refused to be strait-jacketed by prevailing historical models. For Popkin, the history of philosophy is more than the history of arguments, but requires close attention to the context in which those arguments were produced. To most historians of philosophy now, this seems obvious (for example, Dan Garber's trademark as a historian of philosophy is his insistence on the importance of context). But it is worth underlining the point that Popkin more than most has helped philosophers understand the importance of the non-philosophical context, especially since this was by no means obvious to all self-styled historians of philosophy when Popkin first started publishing in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One thing he understood clearly was that the limitations of the anachronistic rationalist-empiricist model of philosophical history dominant at the time he first started publishing. Endorsing the views of George Boas, he wrote in 1959,

It seems to me... that we have been shackled by a mythology about our philosophical heritage. The German historians of philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century constructed the historical past of contemporary philosophy. They singled out the two great traditions before Kant, that of the British empiricists (Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume) and that of the Continental rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Malebranche), with Kant as the synthesizer of the two. This scheme has had, and still has its great virtues... However, this scheme has had the vice of restricting the thinkers and issues that we consider. We gain in simplicity, but lose in richness and variety. More than that, why should we now be tied to the issues and thinking given us by German scholars of a century and a half ago, especially if fresh research indicates other lines of development?⁸

⁸R.H. Popkin, "Did Hume Ever Read Berkeley?" in Popkin, *The High Road to Pyrrhonism* (San Diego, CA: Austin Hill, 1980), 277–287, p. 286 (article first published in *Journal of Philosophy*, 56 (1959), 535–545.

The “richness and variety,” which attracted him to early modern philosophy was not just a matter of making border incursions across the rationalist-empiricist demarcation line in order to trace more accurate philosophical pedigrees. It also entailed crossing boundaries into non-philosophical domains. Popkin had a keen sense of the non-philosophical motivations of thinkers of the past, especially of the way their religious beliefs were integral to their thought and shaped their reception of the ideas of others. Although the relevance of religion is now taken for granted by most serious scholars of philosophical history, the point is worth emphasising since, at the time when Popkin entered the scholarly arena, philosophy, and, especially science, were assumed to be fundamentally secular, if not incompatible with religious belief. Furthermore, Popkin took a long view of philosophical history, in which he saw continuities between seventeenth- and even eighteenth-century philosophy going back to the Renaissance. This, too, is worth emphasising in view of standard treatments of Descartes as the first of the moderns, and the concomitant tendency to explain philosophical modernity in terms of rupture with philosophical tradition. Here, Popkin’s exposure to the methods of his teacher Paul Oscar Kristeller shows through, as it does in the essentially multi-disciplinary perspective he brought to the history of thought.

In enlarging the scope of his historical enquiry, Popkin’s purpose came to have more to do with trying to view early modern philosophy in contemporary terms, than simply with expanding the knowledge-base of what, today, constitutes philosophy. As Harry Bracken and Richard Watson observed in their obituary, Popkin spent so long absorbing early modern thinking and ideas that he would joke that he had come to think in seventeenth-century terms!⁹ Popkinian contextualisation in fact is not simply a matter of paying attention to the non-canonical texts of any individual philosopher. Nor is the contextualising philosophy merely a matter of supplying some background information about some of the contemporaries in a particular subject’s field, rather as one might put a frame round a portrait to set off the painting to advantage. The Popkin context is the painting itself, and the landscape he depicts is not one that dry rationalists are likely to recognise – as Susan James acknowledged in her warm appraisal of the infectious appeal of Popkin’s approach:

we are carried along by Richard Popkin’s boundless appetite for all that is liable to strike contemporary students of early modern philosophy as **quaint or just plain crazy**, by his invigorating insistence on the strangeness of our intellectual past.¹⁰

⁹ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43.3 (2005), v.

¹⁰ Susan James, review of *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 1st Oct 1993, p. 24.)

To those more familiar with Popkin's universe than the readers whom Susan James was addressing, the strangeness is the other way round – the distorted perspective with which modern eyes view early modern thought. And nowhere is this better illustrated than in his work on Spinoza. And nowhere is this more useful than in understanding a philosopher who went to such lengths to cover his tracks.

Another aspect of Popkin's work as a historian of philosophy was collective – not in the sense that he directed specific projects, but in the sense that he master-minded co-operative scholarly ventures in order to pool a diversity of expertise and give it common focus. In later years Popkin extended his own multi-disciplinary reach by orchestrating a number of collective scholarly ventures that brought the expertise of others besides himself to bear on topics of common interest. A good number of these were particularly relevant to Spinoza: namely, *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*, edited with Yosef Kaplan; *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, edited with Gordon M. Wiener; *The Books of Scripture and the Books of Nature*, edited with James E. Force; *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe*, edited with Silvia Berti and Françoise Charles-Daubert.¹¹ Of course, Popkin, in his turn, drew on the scholarship of others, among whom particular mention might be made of Lesek Kolakowski, Yosef Kaplan, Henri Méchoulan and Jan van den Berg.

Within the broadly shared territory of Spinoza scholarship, a number of distinctive features make Popkin's study of Spinoza stand out from other studies. First of all, in his interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy, Popkin emphasises Spinoza's anti-skepticism. To interpret Spinoza as anti-skeptical was itself novel in the Spinoza scholarship, and is not a universally accepted even now.¹² Spinoza does not, after all, devote significant time and space to refuting skepticism. Popkin dubs him an "epistemological dogmatist" on the basis of 1 *Ethics*, a6 ("A true idea must correspond with that of which it is the idea") and 2 *Ethics*, p43 ("He who has a true idea, simultaneously knows that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt the truth of the thing perceived").¹³ Since

¹¹ *Menasseh ben Israel and his World*, eds. Yosef Kaplan and Richard H. Popkin (Leiden: Brill, 1989); *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, edited with Gordon M. Wiener (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993); *The Books of Scripture and the Books of Nature* (cit. note 7 above), edited with James E. Force (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994); *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought in Early Eighteenth-Century Europe*, edited with Silvia Berti and Françoise Charles-Daubert (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996).

¹² See, for example, Michael Ayers' review of *The History of Scepticism in British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 2004.

¹³ Cited Popkin, *History of Scepticism* (2003), pp. 251 and 250, from the Shirley translation of *Ethica*.

“the very act of understanding as such makes one aware that he knows and knows that he knows,” Spinoza’s philosophy, therefore, entails “a genuinely anti-skeptical theory, trying to eradicate the possibility or meaningfulness of doubting or suspending judgment.”¹⁴ He thereby sidestepped the skeptical issues that pre-occupied Descartes and Montaigne. Furthermore, in Popkin’s analysis, Spinoza’s epistemological anti-skepticism supports his critique of religion (since dubbed religious skepticism) not simply in the obvious, general, sense that scriptural reading does not measure up to rational analysis, but also in the particular sense that doubt is the condition to which those who rely on scripture rather than reason are prone: “Scepticism is both possible and necessary if one does not have a true idea of God” – the true idea of God being not the God of the bible, but the God of the *Ethics*. In *The History of Scepticism*, Spinoza represents an important point in the development of religious skepticism.

Popkin’s approach to Spinoza is not purely philosophical. The second distinctive feature of Popkin’s treatment of Spinoza is his focus on religion – notwithstanding the destructive impact of Spinoza’s analysis of scripture. This aspect of his work is, of course, directly linked to his account of Spinoza’s skepticism. The religious context for Spinoza’s life and writing of course includes Spinoza’s Jewish origins, where Popkin is particularly alive to Spinoza’s Jewish heritage and, especially to his Marrano (“new” Christian) background. But he also examines the contemporary Christian context in which Spinoza lived and wrote. He did not confine himself to the biographical circumstance of Spinoza’s “exile” among the Dutch Christian community and his friendship with rational Christians like Adam Boreel and the Collegiants, but he explored the impact of the beliefs of the Christians with whom he had contact, including the millenarian interests his Christian friends and acquaintances. Above all, Popkin takes Spinoza’s bible scholarship seriously – in fact he was one of the first to give *Tractatus theologico-politicus* its due in the history of philosophy. As is evident from his study of the religious context of Spinoza’s thought, a third distinctive feature of Popkin’s study of Spinoza are the multiple perspectives he brings to his subject: along with philosophy he combines a number of disciplinary elements – for example Jewish studies, and seventeenth-century religious history. This enabled him to contribute immensely to the reconstruction of Spinoza’s intellectual milieu, peopling it with figures previously ignored, or unknown, such as Menasseh ben Israel, Orobio da Castro, Uriel da Costa, Isaac La Peyrère, Jacques Basnage, Henry

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 251.

Oldenburg, Margaret Fell, Samuel Fisher, Adam Boreel and Henry Morelli.¹⁵ As a result of his investigations, he disposes of some of the myths that have clouded assessments of Spinoza, e.g. the saintly Spinoza of the early biographies, or that the *herem* pronounced against him was part of a pattern of persecution of Spinoza by the Amsterdam Jewish community.

Such conclusions as these bespeak a strong measure of skepticism towards the established “facts” of history – very much the kind of skepticism that is an asset in good detective work. Viewed in chronological sequence Popkin’s researches have all the hallmarks of the professional sleuth, as he ferrets out more information about his subject (for example about Spinoza’s visit to the Prince de Condé, and on the so-called Three Imposters, on Spinoza’s contact with early Quakers).¹⁶ To this enterprise he brought that essential component of the detective’s mentality, a skeptical distance both from his subject and, especially, the opinions of others. The resulting open-mindedness towards possible connections enabled him to unearth new clues, for example on some of Spinoza’s Jewish links. He established that Spinoza’s acquaintance, the physician Henry Morelli, had a Sephardic background.

Spinoza and Bayle

Popkin’s scholarly career may have ended with Spinoza, but it began with that other *enfant terrible* of the seventeenth century, Pierre Bayle. However, his interest in both was not unconnected. Bayle is, arguably, a key figure for Popkin’s Spinoza, and recognition of this goes some way to explaining why Spinoza should figure in *The History of Scepticism*. Furthermore, many of the questions about Spinoza which he set out to answer – and his answers to them are neatly summarised in his last Spinoza book – originated with Pierre Bayle.

Already in the *History of Scepticism*, Popkin touched on Spinoza’s influence and reputation – endorsing the view that he was instrumental in setting

¹⁵ Many of these figures were subjects of separate studies which of themselves constitute important ancillaries to his Spinoza project: “Spinoza and Menasseh ben Israel and Isaac La Peyrère,” *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 8 (1974): 59–63; “Spinoza’s Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam,” *Quaker History*, 73 (1984), 14–28; *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676). His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Popkin and Michael Signer, *Spinoza’s Earliest Publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell’s a Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham Among the Jews* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987); “Spinoza’s Relations with the Quakers,” *Quaker History*, 73 (1956), pp. 142–128.

¹⁶ “Serendipity at the Clark: Spinoza and the Prince of Condé,” *Clark Newsletter*, 10 (1986), pp. 4–7. Berti, Charles-Daubert, Popkin, *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought*; Popkin, “Spinoza’s Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam;” Popkin and Signer, *Spinoza’s Earliest Publication?*

the agenda for Enlightenment hostility to religion. The only critic of Spinoza he discusses (in the final edition of the *History*) is Pierre Bayle, whose article "Spinoza" is one of the longest in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique and Critique*, and who was the only skeptic to attack Spinoza. At a conference in Mexico, in 1963, Popkin gave his assessment of Bayle's method that lays the groundbase for his subsequent treatment of Bayle:

Here [in *Zeno*], and in *Rorarius* and *Spinoza* and in other lengthy examinations of philosophical issues, Bayle is a philosopher's philosopher. He is prolix. He is precise and careful beyond measure. He explores problems minutely. Each step brilliantly leads to the next. Each dilemma forces the opponent into another and less resolvable one. Theory after theory is destroyed, ridiculed, and dissected, until the skeptical result emerges. Bayle leaves no bits or details aside. He wants no loopholes for his opponents to escape through. And, he wants, above all, to make sure that he cannot be accused of misrepresenting the problems or the theories he is dealing with.¹⁷

This excerpt shows that Bayle's philosophical deconstruction of philosophers and their systems impressed Popkin early on. What this passage doesn't show is that he was equally, perhaps more, impressed by the fact that Bayle seems not to have been able to destroy Spinoza's arguments by his usual skeptical method. In *Spinoza* he repeats the view stated in *The History of Scepticism* that every attempt by Bayle to understand Spinoza's philosophy ended in failure: in Popkin's *History*, Spinoza is the philosopher who found an answer to skepticism by, in effect, ignoring it. In the early *Principles of Descartes' Philosophy*, Spinoza omitted to comment on Descartes' methodological skepticism for arriving at truth, while in his mature philosophy, "there are no real sceptics, only ignoramuses."¹⁸ Spinoza's immunity to skeptical critique perhaps explains why Popkin didn't change his view of him as a "super-rationalist." Perhaps, too, Bayle's failure intrigued him sufficiently to enquire further into his account of Spinoza. He was certainly impressed by Bayle's efforts to establish the facts about Spinoza's life.

Bayle made a strenuous effort to find out the actual facts of Spinoza's life. He read a manuscript of an early biography that no longer exists, he questioned people who knew Spinoza, he challenged the hagiography that had grown up about Spinoza by questioning the so-called nobility of Spinoza's rejection of a proposal of a post at Hedelberg and his refusal to visit the prince of Condé.¹⁹

¹⁷R.H. Popkin, "Bayle and Hume," in *High Road to Pyrrhonism*, p. 153 (article first published in *Transactions of the XIIth International Congress of Philosophy*, 10 vols (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964), 9: 317–327.

¹⁸*History of Scepticism* (2003), p. 251.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 298.

Even if Bayle was successful in tarnishing the hagiographical image of Spinoza deriving from his earliest biographers, his scrupulous historical investigations helped to build up a positive portrait of a man who led a commendably moral life, despite being (in Bayle's view) an atheist. The contrast between this and the hostility of Bayle's analysis of Spinoza's system, lead Popkin to wonder what was "the real message" of the article, "Spinoza." But this did not diminish his respect for Bayle's scholarship. On the contrary, many of Dick's productive lines of enquiry into Spinoza's life and philosophy follow Baylean leads: the story of his encounter with Condé, for example, and Spinoza's acquaintance Dr. Morelli (whom Popkin identified as a Sephardic Jew with links to English free-thinking circles). Another topic where Bayle was an important source is his account of the *herem* which ostracised Spinoza from Amsterdam Jewry: according to Bayle, this was pronounced only after Spinoza had left the Jewish community, and only after Spinoza himself had broken the tie. Bayle wrote that this alienation from Judaism was not sudden, but gradual ("Il ne s'aliena ... que peu à peu de leur synagogue").²⁰ Bayle specifically mentions that he had researched this carefully, though without success ("J'en ai rechercher les circonstances, sans avoir pu les déterrer"), and he gives a privileged source for the information he has ("Tiré d'un Mémoire communiqué au Libraire").

In his own account of the excommunication of Spinoza, Popkin picked up on Bayle's report that Spinoza had discussed some of the views later expressed in the *Tracatus Theologico-Politicus* in an unpublished manuscript written in Spanish (a view supported by references to "le livre de Monsr. Van Til" and "Le Journal de Leipsic" of 1695). Popkin was under no illusions about the potential consequences of ostracism from the Jewish community in Amsterdam at this time (illustrated most painfully in the cases of Uriel da Costa and Juan de Prado), but he did not regard Spinoza as a victim of persecution. In his judgment, the available evidence did not point that way. And Bayle's account is one of the main sources on which he based his view. But he did not do so without, in his turn, trying to "déterrer" the reasons for the *herem*. Nor was he uncritical in his use of Bayle: he checked Bayle's sources, questioned some and found more. In his pursuit of information about Spinoza's life and opinions, Bayle was himself something of a seventeenth-century sleuth. Popkin follows this detective model of investigation. Like Bayle, he sought out original sources and documents. And like Bayle he brought into play his skepticism about received opinions – so much so, that he succeeded in putting paid to a good many of the "facts" about Spinoza on which Bayle had based his account.

²⁰ Bayle, *Dictionnaire Philosophique and Critique* (1740), 4: 255.

Popkin, like Bayle, could be ironic and also provocative. An example is his suggestion that this arch-rationalist may have owed something to Jewish kabbalism. Popkin opined that kabbalism is an important aspect of Spinoza's Jewish heritage which should be taken seriously.²¹ He contradicts Spinoza's own dismissal of the kabbalists as nonsense, noting that Spinoza did in fact acknowledge that he had read kabbalistic writings. He claimed, furthermore, that there are echoes of Abraham Cohen Herrera in Spinoza's work and that, "Spinoza, when looked at in terms of what he called the third kind of knowledge, can be read as a rational kabbalist shorn of its imagery and numerology."²² In the absence of firmer evidence, this is a reading of Spinoza that is easy to dismiss. Yet there are few philosophers with the breadth of reading who are in a position to mount a real challenge. It is easy to overlook the fact that Popkin himself did not reduce Spinozism to kabbalism – he merely observed that there appear to be similarities between them. In making his kabbalistical suggestion, Popkin was issuing a typically Popkinian challenge – a challenge to his readers' assumptions about philosophical compartmentalization, and a challenge to Spinoza scholars to explore more thoroughly the uncharted territory of the early-modern Jewish intellectual traditions of which Spinoza was heir.

Legacy

By comparison with the time when the first edition of *A History of Scepticism* appeared, nearly half a century ago, Spinoza studies have changed. It is now standard to treat *Tractatus theologico-politicus* as an integral and important part of Spinoza's *oeuvre*, and not just as an adjunct to his more serious philosophical thinking.²³ Spinoza's intellectual relationship both to his Jewish background and to seventeenth-century Holland are now a standard part of any account of his life and works. Richard Popkin contributed significantly, though not uniquely, to this shift. Others certainly played their part – for example Hubertus Hubbeling, K.O. Meinsma and, more recently, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggeman, Theo Verbeek, Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, Wiep van Bunge, and Stephen Nadler.²⁴ It is particularly the younger

²¹ R.H. Popkin, "Spinoza, Neoplatonic Kabbalist?" in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lena Goodman (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992).

²² R.H. Popkin, *Spinoza*, p. 83.

²³ See his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*.

²⁴ K.O. Meinsma, *Spinoza et son Cercle* (Paris: Vrin, 1983); Henry Méchoulan, *Amsterdam au temps de Spinoza: argent et liberté* (Paris: PUF, 1990); idem, *Être juif à Amsterdam au temps de Spinoza* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991); Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

generation of scholars who acknowledge the inspiration and encouragement of Richard Popkin. It is a paradox which Pierre Bayle would have appreciated that the defender of Spinoza as an arch rationalist should have done so much to restore Spinoza to his religious context. Popkin's Spinoza is more than an interpretation of an early modern philosopher. His investigations of Spinoza's life and work offered an approach to the history of philosophy, which was unquestionably fruitful, and will remain a benchmark for future generations of scholars. His statement of his views is often challenging – but challenging in the sense that they are an antidote to complacency about his subject. Richard Popkin wrote on Spinoza with insight and authority, but never claimed to have said the final word. He would have been the first to agree that, for all his investigations, Spinoza remains in many ways enigmatic and elusive. But Popkin's work has certainly added "richness and variety" to our knowledge and understanding of Spinoza and his philosophy.