

An Interview with Steven Nadler

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Steven Nadler (Columbia, Ph.D. 1986) is William H. Hay II Professor & Evjue-Bascom Professor in Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has also been a visiting professor at Stanford University, the University of Chicago, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (Paris), the École Normale Supérieure (Paris), and the University of Amsterdam (where he was the holder of the Spinoza Chair in 2007). Most of his research has been devoted to the study of philosophy in the seventeenth century, including Descartes and Cartesianism, Spinoza, and Leibniz. He has also examined antecedents of early modern thought in medieval Latin philosophy and (especially with respect to Spinoza) medieval Jewish philosophy, and has written on medieval Jewish rationalism (especially Saadya ben Joseph, Maimonides, and Gersonides). His publications include *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge, 1999; second edition, 2018); *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil* (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2008; paperback, Princeton 2010); *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century* (2009), co-edited with Tamar Rudavsky; *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, 2011) and *The Philosopher, the Priest, and the Painter: A Portrait of Descartes* (Princeton, 2013). *Heretics: The Wondrous (and Dangerous) Beginnings of Modern Philosophy* (Princeton University Press), a graphic book (with Ben Nadler), was published in 2017. His most recent books are *Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi of Amsterdam* ("Jewish Lives", Yale, 2018) and, as co-editor, *The Oxford Handbook to Descartes and Cartesianism*.

Can you tell us something about your personal history, education, influences, and encounters that have oriented your intellectual trajectory?

I am from New York originally, and went to college at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where I majored in philosophy. I was fortunate to study there with Richard Popkin and Richard Watson, leading scholars of early modern philosophy who inspired my interest in the history of philosophy. From them I learned what really good scholarship looks like: how to respect sources (in their original languages), how to bring philosophical analysis and assessment to bear on historical texts, and especially the importance of studying the historical, philosophical, political, scientific and religious contexts of philosophy in the period. Then, in graduate school at Columbia University, in New York, I wrote a dissertation on the Jansenist theologian and Cartesian philosopher Antoine Arnauld, which became my first book. I remain very interested in a number of topics in Descartes and Cartesian philosophy and its legacy: What role do ideas in the mind play in human knowledge? How do early modern philosophers, some of whom were quite religious (even priests) achieve coherence between their theological commitments and their philosophical views? For

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example, how did Cartesian philosophers who were Catholics hope to explain Eucharistic transubstantiation in light of Descartes's metaphysics of body? I became especially interested in the theory of occasionalism, a theory of causation motivated in part by Descartes's metaphysics and physics according to which God is the only genuine causal agent in the universe. The motions of bodies and thoughts in the mind are only "occasions" for God to bring about some other motion in a body or mental event.

My interest in Spinoza came only later after I had published rather technical and specialized work on Cartesians such as Arnauld, Nicolas Malebranche, Arnauld Geulincx and others. At this point in my life I wanted to work more closely on the Jewish tradition, something that – because I am Jewish – would be a bit more meaningful from a personal and familial perspective, and would allow me to spend more time studying Jewish texts and history. I also wanted write something more accessible to a general audience, something that would be read by more than just fellow specialists. But I also wanted to continue working on seventeenth-century philosophy. And then there is my interest in Golden Age Dutch culture. When I noticed that a full-length, up-to-date biography of Spinoza, who was born in Amsterdam and spent his entire life in the Netherlands, was sorely needed, I thought it was a perfect project: it combined seventeenth-century philosophy, a Jewish angle, and a Golden Age Dutch topic, and as a biography it would get read by a relatively broad audience – maybe not a blockbuster, but a significant non-academic readership, especially in the Jewish world. It has been translated into twelve languages, which really pleases me.

How did you meet Spinoza?

Primarily by "fishing" around for a new project beyond my work on Cartesian philosophy in the seventeenth century. I started reading Spinoza's *Ethics* more closely than I had before, then the *Theological-Political Treatise*. At the same time, I began doing research on the history of the Jews in the Dutch Republic, which was a story I become totally fascinated with. It all seemed to merge quite nicely: Spinoza, his family, the history of the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam, his "excommunication", his radical ideas, his circle of acquaintances, the religious and political context of the Dutch Republic, etc... I usually don't start writing until I have a very strong sense of the narrative in mind. In the case of Spinoza, the challenge was to build a compelling story despite the very few extant documentary facts about Spinoza's life, especially his early years in the Portuguese-Jewish community. This meant, with respect to his youth, creating him as a kind of silhouette within the historical facts available, "building around him", so to speak, so that his figure somehow emerges. It was a real literary challenge, if I may say so. And once you get Spinoza in your blood, you are hooked. There is so much to study in Spinoza's few works, so many things you think you understand until you read them again, and you

realize you have even more questions than when you started. I find Spinoza to be more difficult every time I read him – more and more things perplex me, and I want, *I need* to figure them out. It is very easy to get obsessed with Spinoza, and much of my scholarship subsequent to the biography has been related, more or less directly, to that first project on him.

You did work a lot on the place of medieval Jewish philosophy in modern philosophy: what, if any, was the role of Renaissance philosophy as a mediator between the two? I am thinking, for instance, of the importance of Jewish kabbalistic and philosophical thought for Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, among others.

I think that the role that Renaissance philosophy played in the rise of modern philosophy is still under-studied, and a lot of work remains to be done. For some reason, the Renaissance tends generally to get passed over in Anglo-American philosophical scholarship (and I am no less to blame here than others). There are those who work on medieval philosophy, and those who work on early modern philosophy, but somehow the Renaissance – especially from the late fifteenth through the sixteenth centuries – gets a lot less attention than it deserves. (When I was at Columbia in graduate school, Paul Oskar Kristeller, a giant in the field of Renaissance philosophy, had recently retired, so I never had the opportunity to study with him.) My own focus has been on medieval Jewish philosophy's relationship to Spinoza's philosophy in particular, especially Maimonides and Gersonides, and to show how Spinoza's views on a variety of topics – divine providence, virtue and happiness, immortality – cannot really be understood in isolation from medieval Jewish rationalism, and is in fact a kind of logical and natural, if extreme, extension of that tradition.

Your biography of Spinoza is a great example of narrative talent and concern for philological detail: what were your models of biographical writing?

I love reading biographies – of intellectuals, artists, and simply people who have led interesting and consequential lives. I think Ray Monk's biography of Wittgenstein is a model for writing a biography of a philosopher, in terms of getting the right balance between life and ideas. So is Annie Cohen-Solal's biography of Jean-Paul Sartre. The ideal is to present the basic ideas without going into too much detail on the argumentation behind them (except where necessary), lest you lose the attention of the general reader, and then to situate those ideas in a very concrete life. You have to have an engaging and entertaining story to tell. But, at the same time, when someone picks up a biography of a philosopher they presumably want to learn something about his/her ideas – especially with Spinoza. Most lay people have heard something, more or less, about Spinoza, his life and ideas, and thus are curious about his views on particular topics like God, free will, happiness, miracles, the Bible, and so on. Thus, a biography of Spinoza has to address this curiosity and cannot be too superficial with

the philosophy. What I tried to do with Spinoza is give an extended but relatively accessible overview of the main themes of his thought and the reasons that motivated him, probably more than you would find in a typical biography of an intellectual. But I would not call my biography of Spinoza an “intellectual biography”. The subtitle is “A Life”, and that’s what the focus is on.

As a historian of philosophy, what are your favorite historians tout court?

If you mean “historians of philosophy”, then I would have to say I greatly admire the work of Popkin, Watson, and, more recently, Daniel Garber, Catherine Wilson, Susan James, Edwin Curley and others who have very much changed the way we do history of early modern philosophy in the Anglo-American world, in a sense bringing it closer to what European scholars have long done. While remaining interested in the analysis of theses and arguments, they have also shown us how these and other aspects of a philosopher’s works can be illuminated by also studying the social, historical, political, and religious contexts. They have also taken the lead in expanding the “canon” to include so-called “minor” figures (e.g. Arnauld, Malebranche, Simon Foucher, Anne Conway, Elisabeth of Bohemia). These scholars have also shown us the importance of an ecumenical approach to what counts as “philosophy”. Popkin demonstrated how much doing history of philosophy involves a good deal of detective work and digging in obscure literature to illuminate the contexts of philosophy. Garber’s and Wilson’s work, among others, reminds us that in the early modern period, there was no real distinction between philosophy and “science”; the latter was just “natural philosophy”. And so, for example, Descartes’s epistemology and Leibniz’s metaphysics cannot be really understood apart from their projects in physics. I am also an admirer of – and indebted to – the great French historians of early modern philosophy: Henri Gouhier, Martial Gueroult, André Robinet, Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, and Etienne Gilson. This tradition still exists among scholars like Denis Kambouchner, Jean-Robert Armogathe, Denis Moreau, and others. As for historians generally, I enjoy and am always inspired by the work of Peter Brown, Anthony Grafton, Lisa Jardine, and Simon Schama, as well as biographies by Jenny Uglow, Claire Tomalin and David McCullough, not to mention autobiographies and memoirs. I enjoy immersing myself in the life and times of a fascinating character, whether that person is famous (John Adams, T. E. Lawrence, Iris Murdoch, Charlie Chaplin) or not-so-famous (Agnes Smedley, Anthony Blunt; and I recently enjoyed reading the memoir of the Japanese scholar Donald Keene.)

What is your view on the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy in the present days? Are analytic philosophy and history incompatible?

They are absolutely compatible. In fact, one of the questions I always resent being

asked is: “Besides doing history of philosophy, do you also do philosophy?” I think that doing history of philosophy *is* doing philosophy. You are interested not only in the grand ideas per se, but also in the very detailed theses and arguments behind those ideas, and assessing the theses as true or false and the arguments as valid or invalid, sound or unsound. Philosophy is a dialogic enterprise, and historians of philosophy are philosophers who just happen to be in philosophical dialogue with thinkers long dead. There is a difference between doing history of philosophy and doing intellectual history, in my views. While the intellectual historian is primarily interested in explaining the ideas and perhaps the lives and times behind them, as well as the transmission, ancestry, and legacy of the ideas, such historians are typically not interested in asking what is “true”, or whether an argument is a good one, or what a thinker could have, should have or would have said in response to this or that objection. The historian of philosophy, on the other hand, is a philosopher. Thus, not only is s/he interested in knowing who said what, but s/he cannot avoid asking just those questions about truth, validity and soundness that are central to philosophy. The historian of philosophy wants to know: Did this philosopher get it right? Does she offer good arguments for her position?

Your readers invariably acknowledge your narrative talent even when it comes to hard philosophical issues. Have you ever thought about becoming a novelist? More broadly, what is your view about fiction and non-fiction literature?

I am convinced that writing fiction is a totally different skill set from writing narrative non-fiction. The creation of characters with personalities and dimensions, the convincing construction of dialogue, all of this requires a real talent. I did try, at one point, to start a novel about Spinoza, but I quickly realized that it was no good; it read like a scholar trying to write a novel. That said, I do believe that some of the skills that serve a novelist are useful for non-fiction: knowing how to tell a good story, how to move things along so that the pacing keeps the reader engaged, and structuring things – especially when it comes to explaining philosophical ideas – in a way that is accessible but not condescending and simplistic. Both the novelist and the scholar need to keep their audience in mind: who are they writing for, how are they going to maintain their attention, etc. In short, really good non-fiction, especially a biography, should read like a novel.

The attention paid to the audience is in itself a political choice, isn't it? With regard to this, Spinoza always seems to be a case in point. You were part of the advisory committee that should advise the Amsterdam rabbi in order to lift the 1656 ban issued by the community against Spinoza. Whereas you have already explained that there were no good historical or legal reasons for lifting the ban (which was also the rabbi's view), I was wondering whether you ever reflected upon the place of Spinoza in contemporary society and especially in the media. I am asking this because you probably know that the most important satirical

blog in Italy is indeed called “Spinoza”, which hints at his still remarkable fame as a critical thinker from a political point of view.

It is quite remarkable how Spinoza has seeped into popular culture: novels, theatrical drama, films, the visual arts, even opera and rock bands -- and, as you say, a blog. We even have “Spinoza Bagels” in the United States. Something about his life and ideas have struck a chord among a lay audience that really is quite singular; you don’t find a lot of people outside academia being so taken with Aristotle, Descartes, Locke or Hume, for example. There is something about Spinoza that appeals to the popular imagination. Part of it, I think, is the opacity and complexity of his ideas, which make them somewhat mysterious and enticing. But there is also, I think, the radicalness of his philosophy -- Spinoza was way ahead of his time, really the first truly modern thinker, which makes him a kind of avant-garde rebel, and everyone loves a rebel, especially one who was attacked as a heretic by his contemporaries. Then there is the mystery of his life, since we really have so little concrete information, especially about his early years and the *herem* he received from the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community as a young man. All of this makes him somewhat fascinating. Perhaps above all, Spinoza’s popularity derives from his continued relevance. There are not many Cartesians or Leibnizians around today; in fact, it may not even make sense to say that you are a Cartesian or Leibnizian. However, it is perfectly reasonable to say, today, that one is a Spinozist. In my view, Spinoza got it all right, and to the extent that we believe in a secular, democratic, liberal and tolerant society, and reject the superstitions that characterize some religions, we are the heirs of Spinoza.