



A story influenced by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza



A remarkable journey awaited in the buzzing classroom, where inquisitive minds sought knowledge. The students embarked on an exciting journey known as "Classroom Time Travel" driven by their fascination with history. A mysterious entrance blended into the walls, ready to transport them back in time. The Jewish Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza is there to engage with the students and answer their questions about philosophy. Four students, their teacher Mrs. Taylor and the Philosopher participate in the discussion. The students are in groups of two and they have different philosophical works of Spinoza in front of them.

Teacher: Please sit in pairs. We are delighted to have a great philosopher with us today. He is one of the key figures in Enlightenment thought, modern biblical criticism, and 17th-century Rationalism.

The children were already looking at the philosopher with curiosity and high expectations.

Teacher: Our guest is Mr Baruch Spinoza, one of the most important and radical philosophers of the early modern era. He is here today to engage in a conversation with you and answer any questions you may have. Feel free to inquire about anything during this open discussion.

Spinoza: Good morning. Thank you for the invitation. I am delighted to be here with you.



The students were captivated as the Philosopher continued speaking.

Spinoza: So, I'm ready for your questions.

All four hands shot up without hesitation.

Spinoza: It seems we have plenty of questions here.

1st Student: So, could you tell us a few things about yourself?

Spinoza: Certainly, as you already know, I am Baruch Spinoza, also known as Bento or Benedictus de Spinoza. As your teacher already mentioned, I am a Jewish Dutch philosopher born in Amsterdam on 24 November 1632 to a family of wealthy Portuguese Jewish merchants. On the death of my father in 1654, I along with my brother took over the responsibilities of our family business.

2nd Student: Did you continue working in the family business?

Spinoza: No, I did not. Do you want to know why? Well, I actually couldn't. I left the family business to pursue lens-making and craftsmanship in optics, while, at the same time, immersing myself in philosophical studies.

3rd Student: And...? Then what happened?

Spinoza: Well, in 1656 I was excommunicated from the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam after being issued a herem - Do you know what a herem is? It is the highest form of censure in the Jewish community, involving the total exclusion of a person from the Jewish community. I was accused of "monstrous deeds" and "abominable heresies".





Excommunicated Spinoza, painting by Samuel Hirszenberg, 1907, Source: Wikimedia Commons

4th Student: But did you actually commit any of those actions?

Spinoza: Thank you for asking me this question. I can confidently say no, I didn't. In fact, there is no evidence to suggest that I committed any of the actions I was being accused of. The allegations themselves were not clearly defined. However, the accusations arose from my philosophical viewpoints concerning God, religion, Judaeo-Christian values, and the soul, which contrasted with the prevailing beliefs held by the Talmud Torah congregation at that time.

1st Student: So, what happened after your ex-communication?

Spinoza: Well, my dear students, after being excommunicated, I changed my first name from the Hebrew 'Baruch' to the Latin 'Benedictus', both of which mean 'blessed'. Then, in 1661, I moved from Amsterdam to the suburb of Rijnsburg, Netherlands, after surviving an attempted assassination with a knife while leaving a theatre.

2nd Student: Our teacher told us that you were labeled as an 'atheist'. What were the consequences of being identified as such?

Spinoza: While some authors labeled me an 'atheist,' others perceived me as attempting to replace the concept of God with Nature. In reality, as a staunch critic of conventional religion, my intention was to disentangle God from superstition and to disconnect scriptural interpretation from supernatural revelation.

3rd Student: And what led them to give you that title?

Spinoza: I was given this 'title' because I openly criticized popular religions, considering them "a grave danger to the peace and stability of the state". Concurrently, I dedicated much of my work to the interpretation of scripture and advocating the complete freedom of religion. Moreover, as a psychological egoist, I maintained that individuals are primarily motivated by their personal interests. From this, one can deduce that I considered human worth based on their usefulness to others. Paradoxically, I also advocated for a "human community based on love and friendship".

4th Student: How would you describe your writing style and methodology?

Spinoza: That's an interesting question. Well, like many other 17th-century philosophers, my writing style and methodology can be described as analytical. The description 'analytical' here refers to the argumentative style and methodology, where propositions are outlined as arguments, consisting of premises and conclusions. In my case, these arguments often take the form of 'proofs' presented under each proposition.



1st Student: How does this writing style benefit us, as young learners?

Spinoza: Well, my writing style allows young learners, who are new to philosophy, understand essential logic concepts. By employing these concepts you can methodically analyze the ideas I present, evaluate how they fit together logically, and eventually determine their validity, soundness, strength, and cogency. This approach introduces you to a vital part of philosophy: logical and argumentative thinking. Much of the historical development of philosophy can be understood as the critical reception, interpretation, and advancement of philosophical ideas, concepts, systems, and methods by one group of philosophers in response to the works of others. This also involves instances of (mis)understanding between philosophers and the ensuing critical dialogues among them. Pretty intriguing, right?

Students continue staring at the philosopher in amazement, nodding in agreement.

1st Student: But do you believe that critical thinking is of any value?

Spinoza: Absolutely yes! Without a doubt, critical thinking and reasoning is a valuable tool for philosophers, philosophy researchers as well as philosophy students. They help you contemplate and grasp the ideas of influential philosophers within their historical, social, and political contexts.

2nd Student: Do you have the same opinion on logical and argumentative thinking?

Spinoza: Well, my friend, logical and argumentative thinking is an important starting point for philosophy beginners, just like yourself. These skills provide you with tools that will enable you to critically evaluate influential ideas and arguments presented by noteworthy thinkers.

3rd Student: Where would you place yourself?

Spinoza: Hmm... Well, like many, if not most philosophers it is difficult to categorize my work into one or two areas of philosophy. Let me give you an example: the work begins with metaphysics and extends into my theory of knowledge (epistemology) – which is closely intertwined with my metaphysics, as both my metaphysics and epistemology are interrelated with my ethics.

4th Student: What about ‘Tractatus Theologico-Politicus’, How would you categorize it?

Spinoza: Likewise, “Tractatus Theologico-Politicus” is a treatise on the relationship between religion and the state. It covers the realms of philosophy of religion, political philosophy, ethics and metaphysics.



4th Student: I have another question.

Spinoza: Please, go ahead.

4th Student: What does 'explanatory rationalism entail?'

Spinoza: The concept of 'explanatory rationalism' is present in my metaphysics. Through this, I wanted to align logical or absolute necessity with causal necessity. According to this reasoning, the process of connecting premises to their conclusions in valid arguments is just as necessary as the link between a cause and its effect.

1st Student: Are there any other themes we should consider?

Spinoza: Well, another theme in my metaphysics for which I am well known, is 'concept dualism', a theme inherited from Descartes' mind-body dualism. Sharing the same assumption as Descartes, that matter and mind are two fundamentally different entities, I also assert that there is absolutely no overlap between the material attributes of physical things and the aspects that pertain to the human mind or thought.

2nd Student: Given your views, why are you often categorized as a 'substance monist'?

Spinoza: Well, this is actually because I claim that there is only one kind of substance from which all other living and non-living entities derive from. I attribute this kind of substance to God or Nature.

3rd Student: Does this viewpoint lead to the identity theory of mind and body?'

Spinoza: Indeed, it does. According to this theory, as put forward by more contemporary identity theorists, mental phenomena, such as pain, are identical with neuronal states in the brain. However, this is another theory closely connected with neuroscience and goes beyond our current discussion.

Teacher: Well, students, I believe Mr. Spinoza has answered all your questions. Thank you for your precious time, Mr. Spinoza. It was wonderful having you here. We have all learnt some valuable information about your philosophical theories today.

Spinoza: The pleasure was mine Mrs. Taylor. Thank you for inviting me. I must say, you have a class full of promising young philosophers.

As the students stand up and say goodbye, bowing respectfully to Spinoza, a mysterious doorway begins to appear behind the shelves, ready to transport them back to their classroom.