

## A Modest Spinozist: George Eliot and the Limits of Rationalism

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At the height of nineteenth-century debate over rationalism, George Eliot clearly defines its limits. For the Victorians, “rationalists” come in three overlapping waves: first, German Biblical scholars explain away supernatural events in the Bible, next, Anglican theologians ground Christianity in reason and conscience rather than scriptural and ecclesial authority, and last, after 1860, popular historians describe a trans-historical reform movement that aims to shape a more educated, tolerant, and prosperous Europe.<sup>1</sup> Eliot’s 1865 essay “The Influence of Rationalism” addresses this “great subject” in the mind of the “general reader.”<sup>2</sup> She knows her subject well; before becoming George Eliot, Marian Evans translated infamous classics of rationalism into English for the first time: Baruch Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* (in 1843), David Friedrich Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus* (in 1846), Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (in 1854), and Spinoza’s *Ethics* (in 1856).<sup>3</sup> Eliot argues that rationalism describes the fashionable opinion that regular laws, which the natural sciences increasingly discover, completely govern the universe—as opposed to miracles or random accidents. The same opinion holds that the same regular laws, which psychologists increasingly discover, completely govern human action—as opposed to agent-causal free will. Since Eliot shares these opinions, she is

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Bennett, “A History of ‘Rationalism’ in Victorian Britain,” *Modern Intellectual History* 15.1 (2018): 63-91.

<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, “The Influence of Rationalism,” pp. 397-414, in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 397-8.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot’s translation of the *Ethics* has finally been published in recent years. Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Clare Carlisle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

overlooked as a *critic* of rationalism. Yet it is precisely because Eliot is profoundly immersed in rationalism that we should give particular weight to her criticisms. Like her near-contemporary Fyodor Dostoevsky,<sup>4</sup> Eliot's critiques of rationalism mostly develop in her fiction. Eliot's novels trace the limits of rationalism short of a comprehensive knowledge of human affairs, and temper expectations for rationalist blueprints for social and political reform.

Making sense of Eliot's tempered rationalism sheds light on two scholarly controversies: one about the politics of her novels, and the other about Spinoza's influence on Eliot. Magazines periodically speculate upon how she would view British political issues—Midlands support for “Brexit,” for example.<sup>5</sup> An immediate quandary is how closely to identify Eliot with her characters or the narrators of her novels. Take what Nancy Henry calls Eliot's “most directly political work.”<sup>6</sup> Eliot writes an “Address to the Working-Men by Felix Holt” under the name of the chastened radical protagonist of her novel *Felix Holt*. Does Holt speak for Eliot? Given such complexities and the intense interest in Eliot's politics, scholarly views run the gamut. One reads

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<sup>4</sup> See the contribution in this volume by Richard Avramenko.

<sup>5</sup> e.g., Rebecca Mead, “How George Eliot's ‘Middlemarch’ Resonates in the England of 2019,” *The New Yorker*, 21 November 2019; Kathryn Hughes, “What George Eliot's ‘provincial’ novels can teach today's divided Britain,” *The Guardian*, 16 November 2019. See also Kathryn Hughes on why Eliot would have reluctantly supported New Labour in “If George Eliot could vote,” *Prospect*, 20 May 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and politics,” pp. 138-158, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 141.

she is “conservative”<sup>7</sup> as well as “liberal,”<sup>8</sup> “antipolitical”<sup>9</sup> as well as “radical,”<sup>10</sup> and a classical-liberal defender of free markets<sup>11</sup> as well as a robust “corporatist” with paternalist arguments for the welfare state.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Eliot sometimes called a defender of nations and nationhood, even a “localist,”<sup>13</sup> while other times she is called a “cosmopolitan.”<sup>14</sup>

Rationalism does not immediately appear to be a promising approach to vexed questions about Eliot’s politics, since it arrives in another scholarly controversy: the relationship between Eliot and Spinoza. With some exceptions,<sup>15</sup> scholars regard Spinoza as the most important rationalist influence on Eliot. Dorothy Adkins argues that Eliot basically teaches Spinozism in novel form.<sup>16</sup> Isobel Armstrong and Moira Gatens note parallels between Eliot’s novels and the

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<sup>7</sup> Evan Horowitz, “George Eliot: The Conservative,” *Victorian Studies* 49.1 (2006): 7-32.

<sup>8</sup> These scholars are concerned with liberalism in a broader sense than political liberalism, though the two are not entirely disconnected. Sebastian Lecourt, *Cultivating Belief: Victorian Anthropology, Liberal Aesthetics, and the Secular Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also chapters 2 and 3 of Dwight A. Lindley III, “Liberalism in Question: Anthropology and Epistemology in the Thought of George Eliot and John Henry Newman,” Ph.D. diss., University of Dallas (2011).

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and politics,” 142. See also June Skye Szirotny’s argument that Eliot’s feminism does not include a commitment to political activism in “Why George Eliot was not a Political Activist,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 13.3 (2012): 184-193.

<sup>10</sup> Ilana M. Blumberg, “‘Love Yourself as Your Neighbor,’ The Limits of Altruism and the Ethics of Personal Benefit in *Adam Bede*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009): 543-560, 546.

<sup>11</sup> John O. McGinnis, “Marriage, Market, and Politics in *Middlemarch*,” *Law & Liberty*, 28 February 2018.

<sup>12</sup> John Kucich, “The ‘Organic Appeal’ in *Felix Holt*: Social Problem Fiction, Paternalism, and the Welfare State,” *Victorian Studies* 59.4 (2017): 609-635.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Martel, “Reforming ‘Petty Politics!’: George Eliot and the Politicization of the Local State,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47.3 (2019): 575-602.

<sup>14</sup> David Kurnick, “Unspeakable George Eliot,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38 (2010): 489-509.

<sup>15</sup> These focus on Feuerbach and D. F. Strauss. See, for example, Barry Qualls, “George Eliot and religion,” pp. 119-137, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Cyrus Seaberry Frost, “‘The Sudden Thrill of Change’: Framing George Eliot’s Social Vision,” Ph.D. diss., University of Denver (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Romantic Reassessment 78 (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1978).

moral psychology of Parts III, IV, and V of Spinoza's *Ethics*.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Adkins, they agree with Virgil Martin Nemoianu that Eliot "advance[s] past Spinoza" by showing how his philosophical orientation is lived by individual persons and how they imagine particular circumstances.<sup>18</sup> The scholarly verdict on Eliot's Spinozism is not unanimous, however. Brian Fay argues that Eliot rejects the "explanatory rationalism" of Spinoza, and develops a distinct understanding of imagination and perception that departs from Spinoza.<sup>19</sup> More fundamentally, Catherine Villanueva Gardner argues this approach underappreciates Eliot's originality as a philosopher, and even her reasons for conveying philosophy in the form of the novel.<sup>20</sup> If Eliot's relationship to Spinoza and philosophy is unclear, her view of rationalism would seem controversial, too. But this is no dead end.

Eliot's definition of rationalism in "The Influence of Rationalism," which does not reference Spinoza directly, is our starting point. Starting from an essay avoids the quandary of taking a certain character, narrator, or novel as dispositive of Eliot's views from the start. Clare

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<sup>17</sup> Isobel Armstrong, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions," *A Companion to George Eliot*, eds. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 294-308; Moira Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," *Literature and Philosophy* 33.1 (2009).

<sup>18</sup> Virgil Martin Nemoianu, "The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*," *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (2010): 65-81, 79. See also James Arnett, "Daniel Deronda, Professor of Spinoza," in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44 (2016): 833-854. However, this newer critical line departs from the argument that *Daniel Deronda* departs from determinism in Robert Preyer, "Beyond the Liberal Imagination: Vision and Unreality in *Daniel Deronda*," *Victorian Studies* 4 (1960).

<sup>19</sup> Brian Fay, "What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza," *Philosophy and Literature* 41.1 (2017): 119-135, 124. See also Simon Calder, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Literature," in *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy*, ed. Beth Lord (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2012): 168-187; Sophie Alexandra Frazer, "George Eliot and Spinoza: Toward a Theory," *George Eliot—George Henry Lewes Studies* 70.2 (2018): 128-182; This remains an open question in Moira Gatens, "Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief," *European Journal of Philosophy* 20.1 (2012): 74-90.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Women Philosophers: Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Carlisle starts from two different essays in her own compelling article about affinities between Eliot and Spinoza, but as far as I know, no scholars approach Eliot's relationship to Spinoza or her politics through "The Influence of Rationalism."<sup>21</sup> Eliot's definition of rationalism has a political aspect. She connects the "great conception of universal regular sequence," the general assumption that the universe is governed by regular laws discoverable by the physical sciences, to fashionable political opinions favoring religious toleration.<sup>22</sup> In more current philosophical jargon, then, liberalism is a consequence of naturalism. Eliot's rationalist characters illustrate this. Although Eliot's novels adopt a rationalist *orientation*, and trace the invisible causes of affects, beliefs, and habits, their *evaluation* of rationalism in politics is not necessarily positive. Instead, Eliot's rationalist characters repeatedly encounter two problems: a complexity problem and a reflexivity problem. First, the sheer complexity of human beings' affections, beliefs, and habits eludes comprehensive understanding, so political reforms that discount or weaken "irrational" affections, beliefs, and habits damage communities. Second, many of Eliot's rationalist characters are too arrogant to apply their worldview reflexively upon the causes of their *own* affections, beliefs, and habits; the resultant deficit of self-knowledge leads them to oversimplify the world. Complexity and arrogance are the two limits of rationalism for Eliot, always impeding attempts at scientifically grounded political reform.

My essay has three parts. First, I show how Eliot's "The Influence of Rationalism" (1865) sifts a definition of rationalism out of a conventional Victorian debate that is mainly theological. Second, I argue that Eliot's definition of rationalism implicates Spinoza. Third, I

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<sup>21</sup> These two essays are "The Natural History of German Life" (1855) and "Notes on the Form of Art" (1868). See Clare Carlisle, "George Eliot and Spinoza: Philosophical Formations," *Victorian Studies* 62.4 (2020): 590-615.

<sup>22</sup> George Eliot, "The Influence of Rationalism," 413.

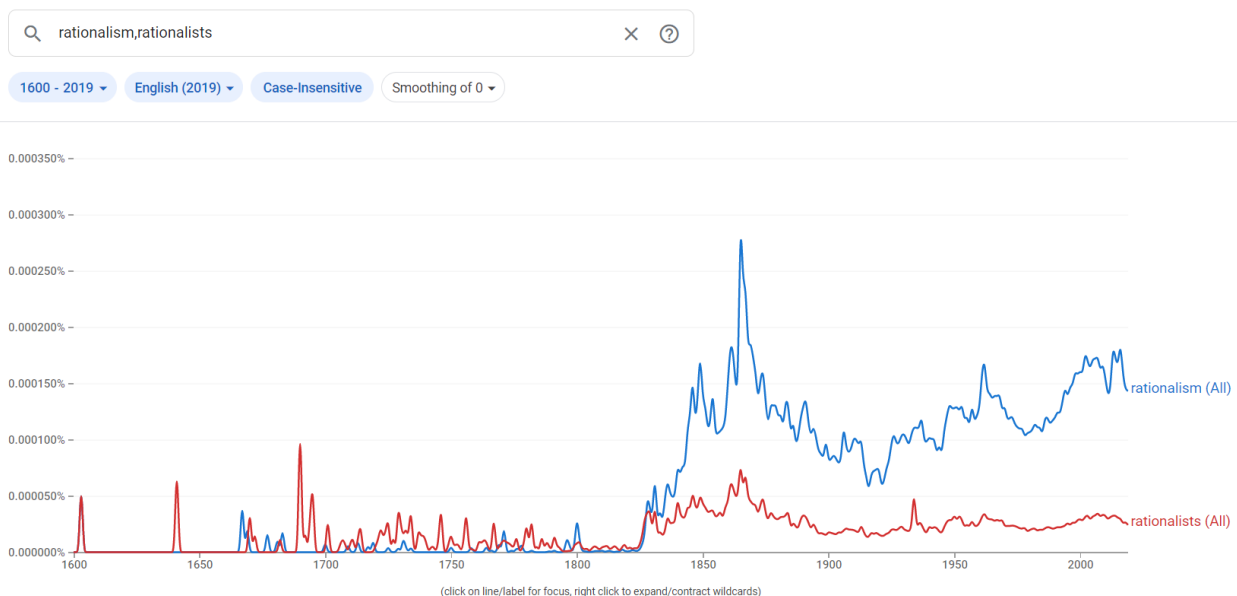
turn the novels Eliot writes afterwards: *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1872), *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879)—thus ending as I begin with an overlooked text of Eliot. I show how Eliot raises the complexity problem and the reflexivity problem in these novels. A modest Spinozist, Eliot emerges as a distinctly conservative rationalist who underlines the limits of rationalism as a social program.

### 1. Eliot on the Victorian Rationalism Debate

The year 1865 represents a peak of public discussion of “rationalism” in the English-speaking world.<sup>23</sup> Much of this discussion is ecclesial or theological. John Henry Newman, most famously, decides to publicly defend leaving Anglicanism for the Roman Catholic Church two decades earlier. He describes facing a choice between two “contending powers, Catholic Truth

<sup>23</sup> A Google Books N-gram viewer search shows “rationalism” was 0.0001027724% of all words used in 1865, surpassing later peaks in 1961 and 2016. “Rationalists” also peaks in 1865, only surpassed by a 1690 spike. Retrieved 27 May 2021.

Google Books Ngram Viewer



and Rationalism.”<sup>24</sup> Less well-known, but perhaps the most interesting defender of rationalism as a true expression of moral theism, is the women’s rights activist Frances Power Cobbe. Her *Broken Lights* argues that Christians ought to approach God through reason, not the particulars of Biblical history.<sup>25</sup> Other Protestants decry rationalism, though. In a letter to the Episcopal clergy, Rev. Charles Pettit McIlvanie argues that rationalism updates eighteenth-century deism’s attacks on miracles, divine revelation, and scriptural truth—its true name, in short, is “infidelity.”<sup>26</sup> The Victorians recognize that Germany had surpassed England and France as the hotbed of rationalism.<sup>27</sup> Kant’s antithesis between empiricism and rationalism (“the dogmatism of pure reason”)<sup>28</sup> had not yet caught on; the Victorians consider the arch-empiricist David Hume’s argument against miracles a contribution to “rationalism.”<sup>29</sup> The conventional sense of rationalism here is negative; rationalists are *against* traditional Christian dogmatics, *against* religious or scriptural authority in general, and *against* belief in miracles, prophecies, and other supernatural events in the Bible in particular.

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<sup>24</sup> John Henry Newman, *A History of My Religious Opinions* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Francis Power Cobbe, *Broken Lights: An Inquiry into the Present Condition and Future Prospects of Religious Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: 1865). See also Joshua Bennett, “A History of ‘Rationalism’ in Victorian Britain,” 77.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Pettit McIlvanie, *Rationalism: As Exhibited in the Writings of Certain Clergymen of the Church of England: A Letter* (Cincinnati, OH: C. F. Bradley, 1865). McIlvanie responds to *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker, 1860), a notable collection of essays by Oxford Anglicans that criticizes miracles, prophecies, and the direct revelation of the scriptures (this last topic by the famous classicist Rev. Benjamin Jowett).

<sup>27</sup> Alexander McCaul, *Rationalism and Deistic Infidelity: Three Letters* (London: Wertheim, McIntosh, and Hunt, 1861), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 498.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Pettit McIlvanie, *Rationalism*, 15n; McCaul, *Rationalism and Deistic Infidelity*, 12; John Fletcher Hurst, *History of Rationalism* (New York: Carlton and Potter, 1865), 444-446; W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1865), I:172.

W.E.H. Lecky's two-volume *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism* was also published that year.<sup>30</sup> The title's 'Spirit' (viz., *Geist*) suggests both rationalism's German lineage and Lecky's loose definition of his subject. Indeed, he argues rationalism is not "a class of definite doctrines" but a "bias of reasoning," a "cast of thought" that opposes "dogmatic theology" in the name of both reason and religious sentiment.<sup>31</sup> Lecky especially opposes rationalism to Catholicism, much like Newman.<sup>32</sup> And according to Lecky, religious toleration is the first hallmark of rationalist politics, and free trade the second.<sup>33</sup> In more contemporary language, he associates theological rationalism with liberalism.

Eliot's scathing review of Lecky, "The Influence of Rationalism" appears in the inaugural volume of *Fortnightly Review*, edited by her husband<sup>34</sup> George Henry Lewes. She begins by archly critiquing public intellectuals. Imprecision ("a spongy texture of mind, that gravitates to nothingness") attracts general readers to a writer like Lecky, who dilutes his writing to the haziness of common opinion, not condescendingly but as "the honest result of the writer's

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<sup>30</sup> John Fletcher Hurst's *History of Rationalism* is superior to Lecky's in comprehensiveness and clarity. In later life, Hurst also writes on Eliot's relationship to her Methodist aunt Elizabeth Thompson Evans as the model for Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*. John Fletcher Hurst, *History of Rationalism and A History of Methodism, Vol. III: British Methodism* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1902), 1295-1300.

<sup>31</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, I:16-17.

<sup>32</sup> However, while Newman in the *Apologia pro vita sua* favorably gestures to Lacordaire and Montalembert, French Catholics engaged in a rapprochement with French republicanism, Lecky ignores these figures and takes Catholicism's incompatibility with democracy as a given. *Ibid.*, I:186; II:74; II:211. See also Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought*, trans. Richard Rex (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, I:369; II:75; II:207.

<sup>34</sup> Lewes was legally married to another woman, who in turn lived with another partner. The law did not recognize his marriage to Eliot.



own mental character.”<sup>35</sup> (Ouch!) Eliot agrees with Lecky’s argument that religious tolerance is a consequence of the decline in practical beliefs in witchcraft and in Christianity’s offer of exclusive salvation from the torments of hell.<sup>36</sup> But Eliot argues this is a more “painful proof” than Lecky realizes—it means tolerance is a “Fashion.” Eliot explains, “witchcraft to many of us is absurd only on the same ground that our grandfathers’ gigs are absurd.” The multitude of modern Englishmen are rid of the cruelty and horror of witch trials

not because they possess a cultivated Reason, but because they are pressed upon and held up by what we may call an external Reason—the sum of conditions resulting from the laws of material growth, from changes produced by great historical collisions shattering the structures of ages and making new highways for events and ideas, and from the activities of higher minds no longer existing merely as opinions and teaching, but as institutions and organizations with which the interests, the affections, and the habits of the multitude are inextricably interwoven.<sup>37</sup>

Gesturing at myriad causes that Lecky does not explain, Eliot argues fashionably tolerant religious opinions are not very well-grounded. Lecky’s vague gestures to the spirit of the age do not explain how institutions, interests, affects, and habits have bent society away from religious persecution and superstition.

“The word ‘Rationalism’ has the misfortune,” Eliot writes at the end of her review, “shared by most words in this grey world, of being somewhat equivocal.”<sup>38</sup> Not content with Lecky’s imprecision, nor by extension the Victorian ‘general reader,’ Eliot offers her own definition. She centers the “supremely important fact” that rationalism has a “determining current in the development of physical science.” Science contributes to the “gradual reduction of

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<sup>35</sup> George Eliot, “The Influence of Rationalism,” pp. 397-414, in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 398.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

all phenomena within the sphere of established law, which carries as its consequence the rejection of the mysterious” in favor of a “great conception of universal regular sequence, without partiality and without caprice.”<sup>39</sup> Eliot wrenches the Victorian rationalism debate away from theological arguments about authority and supernatural events, tightening her reader’s focus on what we now call naturalism. Neither gods nor men govern the world, the naturalist believes, but natural laws, some understood by science and some yet to be discovered.

Lecky’s account omits *some* writers who, given sufficient attention from the author, could have forged the naturalism-liberalism link she regards as characteristic of rationalism:

Certain epochs in theoretic conception, certain considerations, which should be fundamental to his survey, are introduced quite incidentally in a sentence or two, or in a note which seems to be an after-thought. Great writers and their ideas are touched upon too slightly and with too little discrimination, and important theories are sometimes characterized with a rashness which conscientious revision will correct.<sup>40</sup>

I think the most obvious candidate among the great thinkers missing from Lecky whom Eliot has in mind is Spinoza. Lecky praises “Bacon, Descartes, and Locke,” while only briefly considering Spinoza’s great appeal for toleration, the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, and even then, judging its value to be “chiefly historical.”<sup>41</sup> (As its translator, Eliot might disagree. So might her editor, Lewes, a great enthusiast of Spinoza.) Without pausing to trace Spinoza’s development of Descartes’s rationalism in Biblical criticism and political philosophy, Lecky skips to Spinoza’s great critic Bayle, naming his *Dictionary* “more than any other work the foundation of modern

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 413.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>41</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, I:7; I:305n1. The *Tractatus* was Eliot’s first translation work; given its powerful effect on her, she would probably beg to differ. See Suzy Anger, “Eliot and philosophy,” pp. 76-97, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 78.

rationalism.”<sup>42</sup> It is at least possible that Spinoza is Eliot’s missing arch-rationalist, who shapes the modern opinion that science can grasp ‘external Reason’ and all the causes of the interests, habits, and affections of an entire multitude.

## 2. Eliot on Spinoza’s Rationalism

I shall now argue that Spinoza is the missing great rationalist thinker in Eliot’s review of Lecky’s *History*. This section has three aims: first, briefly presenting Spinoza’s rationalism; second, presenting Eliot’s *understanding* of Spinoza’s rationalism; and third, raising the separate question of Eliot’s *evaluation* of Spinoza’s rationalism.

Spinoza believes that what Eliot calls external Reason can be entirely understood, or at least that there is no in-principle reason why any event could *not* be understood. Philosophers call this Spinoza’s complete commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR)—every event has some sufficient causal explanation. There are no ultimate mysteries, no random events, and no ultimately agent-caused acts of free will. By defending the PSR, Michael Della Rocca explains, Spinoza builds “a stronghold against irrationalism in philosophy and... a challenge to other more complacent ways of doing philosophy.”<sup>43</sup> Spinoza states a variant of the PSR in *Ethics* 1p11d2 (I quote Eliot’s translation): “Of every thing there is necessarily a cause [or reason] to be assigned, either why it exists or why it does not exist.”<sup>44</sup> Della Rocca argues that the PSR is the “key” to unlock Spinoza’s substance monism, rejection of free will, and moral psychology.<sup>45</sup> Not all interpreters of Spinoza think the PSR explains as much of Spinoza’s

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., II:66.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.

<sup>44</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 8.

system as Della Rocca does,<sup>46</sup> but the PSR quickly shows the scope of Spinoza's rationalism. Spinoza does not think humans are rational actors; however, the affective and imaginative causes of even the most irrational behavior are (or could be) intelligible to the one who understands the causes of things.<sup>47</sup> Spinoza's strong conception of a 'universal regular sequence' of causes answers exactly to Eliot's definition of rationalism.

It is now common to see Spinozism as "rationalism on steroids," in Della Rocca's phrase, but does this describe *Eliot's* understanding of Spinoza?<sup>48</sup> If Eliot sees Spinoza as an arch-rationalist, then we have at least circumstantial evidence that he is one of the 'great writers'—if not *the* great writer—whom she accuses Lecky of overlooking. At first, though, it seems we should not collapse Eliot's interpretation of Spinoza with Della Rocca's. After all, Isobel Armstrong and Moira Gatens focus on the deep influence Parts III, IV, and V of the *Ethics* have upon Eliot, mainly, noting how Eliot describes the importance and operations of the affects and imagination much like Spinoza does.<sup>49</sup> Simon Calder, additionally, contrasts Eliot's engagement with the latter books of the *Ethics* from Lewes's fascination from the first propositions of Part I.<sup>50</sup> But Gatens and Nemoianu underscore that Eliot is not interested in 'another Spinoza,' so to speak. Gatens points out that Eliot uniquely underscores Spinoza's line in *Ethics* 2p17s, "*the mind does not err because it imagines.*"<sup>51</sup> The affects and the imaginations are part of the external Reason of human actions, even and especially when these causes are unknown to us.

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, see Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88-99 and 196.

<sup>47</sup> I explain why Spinoza is a political rationalist in this narrow sense, in the prior companion volume to this book. Robert Wyllie, *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, eds. Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 49.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Isobel Armstrong, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions," 298-9.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Calder, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Literature," 170.

<sup>51</sup> Moira Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 79.

Eliot's Spinoza is a rationalist, then, though it is open to question how much his rationalism can understand as a practical matter. Eliot is less sanguine about the possibility of ascending to the knowledge of Spinoza's "wise man" of *Ethics* 5p57s with his "soul scarce moved by external things" because he has "true consciousness of himself, and of God, and of things in virtue of an eternal necessity." But even when Eliot denies the attainability of causal knowledge of everything, we see her take the full measure of Spinoza, summed up in the last line of the *Ethics*: "everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare."

### 3. Modest Spinozism in Eliot's Later Novels

The narrator of *Adam Bede* writes, "Nature has her language... [but] we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet" (AB 15:153). This *yet* fades in Eliot's mature novels *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *Theophrastus Such*.<sup>52</sup> Eliot writes sarcastically about the completely rationalized society in an essay of 1856:

As a necessary preliminary to a purely rational society, you must obtain purely rational men, free from the sweet and bitter prejudices of hereditary affection and antipathy; which is as easy to get running streams without springs, or the leafy shade of the forest without the secular growth of trunk and branch.<sup>53</sup>

The rationalist Holy Grail, then, is a cipher to all these organic *irrational* affections, beliefs, and habits that human beings that shows how they are rational—how to see the rational as actual and the actual as rational, in Hegel's famous motto.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the rationalist needs the Key to

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<sup>52</sup> I cannot offer a complete survey of Eliot's politics, but limit myself to how her attitude towards rationalism shapes it. For example, I omit *Romola*, which has Machiavelli as a character, and is important for her interest in political theory.

<sup>53</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," pp. 266-299 in *Essays of George Eliot*, 287.

<sup>54</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

All Mythologies, the opus that Dr. Casaubon is writing in *Middlemarch*. Before turning to *its* staggering complexity and *his* staggering arrogance, let us first take up Eliot's politics in *Felix Holt*.

Holt is oxymoronomically a conservative radical, much like Eliot. Both witness riots in the aftermath of the Reform Bill of 1832, Eliot as a schoolgirl, Holt as a jaded radical leader trying to redirect a mob. Holt can and does speak for Eliot. In the "Address to Working Men," Eliot/Holt instructs the newly enfranchised workingmen about the complexity problem regarding the "outside wisdom which lies in the supreme unalterable nature of things." This wisdom should have a moderating effect upon our arrogance; the "deeper insight we get into the causes of human trouble," Eliot/Holt writes, the less we should be inclined to blame one particular class for the nation's problems.<sup>55</sup> Holt learns this lesson in the novel, which moderates his contempt for the landed gentry. He witnesses electioneering—liberals trade miners drinks for their votes in the town of Sproxton—that tarnish his democratic idealism. Holt realizes most men "see nothing in an election but self-interest" and "greed" (FH 170).<sup>56</sup> Eliot/Holt reprise these themes in the "Address," urging workingmen to be patient with reforms. The "wonderful slow-growing system" of interdependence in commerce, knowledge, and law that makes up society is a complex and "delicate" web of causes; thus, voting is "a terrible liability" where our blind pursuit of self-interest endangers society.<sup>57</sup>

A decade before writing *Felix Holt*, Eliot praised the conservative radical conspectus into which her character stumbles. She praises the "social-political conservatism... of a thoroughly

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<sup>55</sup> George Eliot, "Address to Working Men, By Felix Holt," *Essays of George Eliot*, 429.

<sup>56</sup> George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 170.

<sup>57</sup> George Eliot, "Address to Working Men, By Felix Holt," *Essays of George Eliot*, 420-1.

philosophical kind” of the German folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl.<sup>58</sup> Riehl notes how peasant customs are “highly irrational and repugnant to modern liberalism,” and reformers prefer “bureaucracy [to come] with its ‘Ready Reckoner’ and [work] all the peasant’s sums for him.”<sup>59</sup> However, such reforms leave peasants worse off by eroding affections and habits that have benefits invisible to the reformers. Eliot commends Riehl’s views that “universal social policy has no validity except on paper,” and “wise social policy must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the Natural History of social bodies.”<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, she makes a case for writing novels. Novelists must present a realistic portrait of the people to moderate overeager social reformers and the damage they will cause:

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious...<sup>61</sup>

Eliot inveighs particularly against romanticizing peasant life. Holt is chastened to discover that his idealized workers are more complex than he believed, with dangerous tendencies toward drunkenness and violence.

*Middlemarch* dispels any sense that Eliot only attributes ignorance to working people and their radical allies; at its core is the arrogance of a scholar who will rationalize all the complexity of the world’s customs and peoples in a Key to All Mythologies. The novel has a realistic rationalist orientation to the causes of its characters’ affections, beliefs, and habits; the narrator famously declares, “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (M, Finale: 795). *Middlemarch* faces the difficulty of tracing

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<sup>58</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, 287.

<sup>59</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, 282.

<sup>60</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, 289-90.

<sup>61</sup> George Eliot, “The Natural History of German Life,” *Essays of George Eliot*, 271.

all these causes. Can we map this “web” and its “threadlike pressures” in all their “frustrating perplexity” (M, 18:175)? Dr. Casaubon’s Key to All Mythologies in the novel is the attempt to do this on a global and historical scale. Will Ladislav disabuses Dorothea of the viability of her husband’s scholarly enterprise. The Germans have outstripped English disciples of Jacob Bryant’s *An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1776) like Casaubon. While some critics see Casaubon’s personal failure here, Fay points to Dorothea’s judgment that her husband’s theory is “withered” from birth like an “elfin child” (M, 48:458; Fay 134n19). He concludes, “Casaubon’s failure thus isn’t just his alone. It is a failure that characterizes all attempts, *including Spinoza’s*, to uncover beneath the diversity of human arrangements a single system of order such that the job of theory is to uncover this theory.”<sup>62</sup> The irrational affections, beliefs, and habits of the peoples of the world are simply too complex to be understood;<sup>63</sup> it is Casaubon’s staggering arrogance, Kamila Walker shows, to believe he can provide a cipher.<sup>64</sup>

Dorothea the “foundress of nothing” matures into a critic of her husband and shows the limits of rationalism (M, Prelude: 8), but Daniel Deronda employs a rationalist orientation to mature into a prospective political founder of a Jewish state in Palestine. He is a positive version of Henry Edward Cardinal Manning’s false prophet capable of leading “humanitarians, rationalists, and pantheists” in a political project to “restore the Jews to their own land.”<sup>65</sup> *Daniel*

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<sup>62</sup> Brian Fay, “What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza,” 130.

<sup>63</sup> Fay argues Ladislav is probably referring to Germans in the wake of Herder like Karl Otfried Müller (1825) for whom that “the mythology of one nation is [to be] studied apart from the others,” but he may refer to Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1812) and unitary view that “the basis of all mythology was a nature worship,” or generally to the debate in Germany between the two positions. Eliot knew both—I quote these descriptions from her 1851 review “The Progress of the Intellect,” pp. 27-45, in *Essays of George Eliot*, 36-7.

<sup>64</sup> Kamila Walker, “Casaubon: A Case of Shameful False Pride in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*,” *The Explicator* 76.2 (2018): 88-95.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1918), 116.



*Deronda* shows that while the modest rationalism in Eliot's novels may be conservative, it is not antipolitical, and also that it works through human beings' particular attachments to their heritage and to particular communities, rather than amounting to an enlightened cosmopolitanism. Many Eliot scholars—James Arnett, Nemoianu, and Michael Mack<sup>66</sup>—read the novel as a template for Spinoza-inspired ethical and political reform. It is Eliot's only novel to mention Spinoza by name (DD 38: 472). Deronda's *marrano* heritage certainly recalls Spinoza, too (see DD 50: 620). However, he reverses Spinoza's trajectory: Spinoza is born into the Amsterdam Jewish community and leaves to assimilate into Dutch society, Deronda is born assimilated into English society and only discovers his membership in the Jewish community by degrees. The contrast should not be overdrawn: first, Spinoza is not a symbol of Jewish assimilation in the novel, which invokes his qualified belief that a Jewish state will be reestablished in the future (DD 52:532).<sup>67</sup> Second, the narration and Deronda's character has a strong rationalist orientation, most famously in the epigraph to Chapter 16:

Men, like planets, have both a visible and an invisible history. The astronomer threads the darkness with strict deduction, accounting so for every visible arc in the wanderer's orbit; and the narrator of human actions, if he did his work with the same completeness, would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action... (DD 16: 164)

However, Deronda does not learn to read the invisible history of the human beings around him completely and infallibly, nor is this necessary for his political project. As we shall see, Deronda avoids the arrogance of Eliot's other rationalist characters because he is resigned to the complexity problem.

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Mack, "The Significance of the Insignificant: *Daniel Deronda* and the Literature of Weimar Classicism," *Modern Philology* 105.4 (2008): 666-697, 669-672.

<sup>67</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. Martin D. Yaffe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 42.

Deronda is involved in Zionism after he is sighted by the visionary Mordecai. From his studies of Kabbalah,<sup>68</sup> Mordecai imagines his thoughts “closely inwoven with the growth of things,” so that he hopes for a “second soul” out there ready to absorb his ideas and carry on his mind (DD 38: 473; cf. 43: 540).<sup>69</sup> When Mordecai brings Deronda to a club of “The Philosophers” to debate the causes of social change,<sup>70</sup> Deronda makes the following argument, to Mordecai’s approval:

‘I really can’t see how you arrive at that sort of certitude about [social] changes by calling them development,’ said Deronda, ‘There will still remain the degrees of inevitableness in relation to our own will and acts, and the degrees of wisdom in hastening or retarding; there will still remain the danger of mistaking a tendency which should be resisted for an inevitable law we must adjust ourselves to – which seems to me as bad a superstition or false god as any that has been set up without the ceremonies of philosophizing.’ (DD 42: 526).

Unlike Casaubon, Deronda’s rationalism includes introspection and resignation that social and political changes always involve uncertainty. A letter from his friend Hans Meyrick commends Deronda’s “supreme reasonableness,” which Meyrick attributes to the fact that Deronda is always prepared for the worst (DD 52: 643). Deronda has political aspirations, but as Henry points out, his hope for a Jewish state remains just that at the end of the book.<sup>71</sup> His ability to influence the characters of the novel is limited; he educates the main protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth, but fails to help his mother overcome her bitterness towards Judaism.

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<sup>68</sup> The influence of Kabbalah upon Spinoza arouses intense scholarly interest presently. See especially Miquel Beltrán, *The Influence of Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s Kabbalah on Spinoza’s Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Shalyn Claggett argues that Mordecai, attuned to the “limiting and troubling ways” others could twist his political vision (for instance to racist exclusivism), seeks a reflective and sensitive soul like Deronda. Shalyn Claggett, “George Eliot’s Interrogation of Physiological Future Knowledge,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 51.4 (2011): 849-864, 860.

<sup>70</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb suggests this resembles the club where Lewes was introduced to Spinoza. See *The Jewish Odyssey of George Eliot* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 88.

<sup>71</sup> Nancy Henry pushes back against Edward W. Said here, charging him with anachronistic condemnation of Eliot’s “Zionism”. See Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and politics,” 155.

Deronda cannot be Spinoza's wise man, because such a perspective would make narrative impossible. We should recall Gardner's argument that Eliot's decision to write novels implies a break with Spinoza:<sup>72</sup> if every cause of all human actions is known in advance (if we could possess Key to All Mythologies), the springs of uncertainty and suspense, problem and resolution, could no longer propel a narrative forward. At least Eliot's "fairy-tale," *Silas Marner*, would become simply derivative and superfluous.<sup>73</sup> Felix Holt would not need to learn a lesson from the electioneering in Sproxtton. We would not need a realistic account of particular human beings in their manifold differences. As an introspective rationalist resigned to a world teeming with unknowns, Deronda instructs us in ways Spinoza does not.

Eliot's last novel, the more obscure and ironic *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, confirms that her critique of rationalism does not fade at the end of her authorship. Instead, its brightlines intensify. Theophrastus considers the "increasing uncertainty which modern progress has thrown over relations of the mind and body" (ITS 11).<sup>74</sup> His friend Merman, a parody of the Victorian man of letters, is drawn to moral and physical science's "vexed questions which have the advantage of not admitting the decisive proof or disproof that renders many ingenious arguments superannuated," and sets out over his wife's good sense to establish a "new view of social origins" with a novel theory of the ways of the "Macigodumbras and Zuzumotzis" (ITS 41 and 43). If Merman is a sketched-comic version of Casaubon, Spike is the same version of Holt, a radical impervious to knowledge. Eliot concludes his story wryly, "The depths of middle-aged

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<sup>72</sup> Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Women Philosophers: Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>73</sup> For *Silas Marner* as an example of fairy-tale writing, see Patrick Swinden, "Epilogue: Part 2 of *Silas Marner*," pp. 95-104, in *George Eliot's Silas Marner*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 2003), 100-2.

<sup>74</sup> George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899?), 11. Lewes began a multivolume synthesis of psychology and philosophical theory in 1867.

gentlemen's ignorance will never be known, for want of public examinations in this branch" (ITS 93). Later, we see that such examinations would have to be comprehensive. How does a British vote "affect the condition of Central Asia in the coming ages," for instance? (ITS 98). We seem to be in the same lot as Theophrastus's acquaintance Mixtus, some combination of the benevolent motives of our youth, plus the interests of our trade, with strong acquired aversions to what our friends and lovers scorn, bereft of both self-knowledge and (probably) friends who know us any better (ITS 113). Rationalism is no help here. The "full extension of the *a priori* method" will only show that "only blockheads could expect anything to be otherwise" (ITS 149). This almost whimsical book, parts delightful and sad, again and again traces the limits of rationalist knowledge.

In Theophrastus the arrogance problem for rationalism emerges most explicitly. The greatest obstacle to rationalism, the downfall of modest rationalism, is the rationalist's desire for the world to conform to her or his reason. A Deronda is saved only by his modest expectations of his knowledge; the "seer, whether prophet, philosopher, scientific discoverer, or poet" must keep a "sanity of expectation" (ITS 156-7). However, if left unchecked by a continued pursuit of self-knowledge *and* acquaintance with the world in all its particulars, rationalism can lead to the "official arrogance of one who habitually issues directions which he himself has never been called on to execute" (ITS 163). Theophrastus's "plan" is to use introspection: whenever he sees an absurdity in others, he seeks to see whether these absurdities are present in him (ITS 147). Self-knowledge and detailed knowledge of others renders the rationalist perspective more modest. In a line that anticipates Michael Oakeshott,<sup>75</sup> Theophrastus argues there is no substitute:

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<sup>75</sup> See Wendell John Coats, "Michael Oakeshott's Critique of Modern Rationalism," pp. 227-236, in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, eds. Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

“One cannot give a recipe for wise judgment: it resembles appropriate muscular action, which is attained by the myriad lessons in the nicety of balance and aim that only practice can give” (ITS 147).

In the end, Eliot is a student of nineteenth-century provincial life, and all the forces that resist rationalist reforms radiating from the great manufacturing towns.<sup>76</sup> Theophrastus belongs to the “Nation of London” (ITS 39), but he has neither forgotten his upbringing in a country parsonage, nor that politics requires that “[a]ffection, intelligence, duty radiate from a centre,” which for most must be felt “unreflectingly,” attachments that render “cosmopolitanism” and “communism” not yet possible (ITS 206). He is much like Eliot. Theophrastus is one with the narrator of *Silas Marner* from almost two decades earlier: “The gods of the hearth exist for us still; and let all new faith be tolerant of that fetishism, lest it bruise its own roots” (SM 137).

### Conclusion

An unresolved question may nag some readers: how modest is *Spinoza's* rationalism? Scholars debate whether Spinoza was committed to democratic social and political reforms grounded in his rationalism, and whether he was sanguine about the prospects for such reforms.<sup>77</sup> While Spinoza is silent about the limits of rationalism for understanding human affairs, Eliot

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<sup>76</sup> For the countryside's resistance to the spirit of rationalism, see W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, II:324.

<sup>77</sup> If Spinoza is a committed democratic theorist, as some argue, Eliot cannot be said to advance Spinozism in the same way that Sara Henary brilliantly argues Trollope advances Tocqueville's, wherein the novelist plays a vital role in shaping citizens' imaginations amidst democratic change, albeit without the perspicacity of the theorist. Eliot does not merely advance Spinoza's political-theory project. More perspicacious or theoretical than Trollope, and certainly more deeply knowledgeable of Spinoza than Trollope was of Tocqueville, she has reservations that Spinoza does not. Sara Henary, “Anthony Trollope: Novelist of the ‘Democratic Revolution’,” *The Review of Politics* 83 (2021): 45-68.

may nevertheless be his true heir. Understanding the full extent of rationalism inclines Eliot to a kind of conservatism. Whatever her legitimate Spinozist inheritance, Eliot invests it wisely, raising her own challenges and doubts that rationalist moral psychology provides an adequate map for social and political reforms.