

BARUCH SPINOZA AND WESTERN DEMOCRACY. By Joseph Dunner. *Philosophical Library, New York*. 1955. 140 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by MARSHALL CRANE

Liberty is one of the things we take more or less for granted in this country. It is the cornerstone of the political philosophy to which we have been exposed from our childhood up. It never occurs to us that there has ever been a seriously considered alternative to it. Yet only three hundred years ago the same ideas which we take for granted were regarded as not only wicked and contrary to divine mandate, but unworkable as well.

Then came a thinker, Baruch Spinoza, who may be said to have laid the philosophical foundation for our modern conception of liberty. That his works are not more read today must be blamed on the current unpopularity of metaphysics, for certainly nothing that he wrote three centuries ago is any less true now than when it was written.

This is a little book on Spinoza by a man who knows his subject thoroughly. As head of the political science department of Grinnell College he is very much at home with the western democracies as well. In a hundred and forty pages he has given the reader a surprisingly clear picture of Spinoza, of his metaphysics, and of his political ideas. He closes with a rewarding chapter on what Spinoza means—or, could mean—to the twentieth century.

Throughout the book one is aware of a strong and heady aroma of the *schule*, which adds not only to its flavor, but also to the reader's understanding of Spinoza and his thought. In too many analyses he is presented without the context of the rabbinical background which was such a strong influence in his thinking, and without which he seems like a different person.

Two hundred years after his death a statue of Spinoza was placed at the Hague by a number of his admirers. At the unveiling, Ernest Renan, who officiated, finished his address as follows: "This man, from his granite pedestal, will point out to all men the way of blessedness which he found: and ages hence, the cultivated traveler, passing by this spot, will say in his heart, 'The truest vision ever had of God came, perhaps, here'."