

A Modest Spinozist: George Eliot and the Limits of Rationalism

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Amid the nineteenth-century debate over rationalism, George Eliot defines its limits. For the Victorians, “rationalists” come in three overlapping waves: first, they are German Biblical scholars explaining away miracles; then, they are Anglican theologians grounding Christianity in reason and conscience instead of scripture; last, by the 1860s, they represent a broad reform movement shaping 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> Nobody in England is more qualified or *au courant*. Before becoming George Eliot, Marian Evans translated the rationalist classics into English: 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> In her essay, Eliot argues that rationalism is the fashionable opinion that the universe is completely governed by regular laws, increasingly known to science, as opposed to random chance or supernatural interventions. Moreover, human action is governed by these same laws, whether understood or not, as opposed to agent-causal free will. Since Eliot shares this fashionable opinion, she can be overlooked as a critic of rationalism. Yet the fact that “no one was more thoroughly abreast of the newest thought” in England, as Basil Willey recognized seventy years ago, lends her criticism special weight.<sup>4</sup> Like her near-contemporary Fyodor Dostoevsky,<sup>5</sup> Eliot criticizes rationalism 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>6</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>7</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 these quandaries and the intense interest in Eliot's politics, scholarly views run the gamut. She is called “conservative”<sup>8</sup> as well as “liberal,”<sup>9</sup> “antipolitical”<sup>10</sup> as well as “radical,”<sup>11</sup> a classical-liberal defender of free markets<sup>12</sup> as well as a robust “corporatist” with paternalist arguments for the welfare state.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Eliot is sometimes called a defender of nations and nationhood, even a “localist,”<sup>14</sup> while other times she is called a “cosmopolitan.”<sup>15</sup>

The rationalism angle does not immediately promise answers about Eliot's politics, since it leads straight into another scholarly controversy: the influence of Spinoza upon Eliot. Contemporary scholars now regard Spinoza as the most important rationalist influence upon Eliot.<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Adkins argues that Eliot's novels basically teach Spinozism.<sup>17</sup> Isobel Armstrong and Moira Gatens note parallels between them and the moral psychology of Spinoza's *Ethics*.<sup>18</sup> They agree with Virgil Martin Nemoianu that Eliot “advance[s] past Spinoza,” showing how individual persons embody rationalism in particular circumstances.<sup>19</sup> This scholarly verdict is not unanimous. Catherine Villanueva Gardner warns that it undermines Eliot's originality as a philosopher.<sup>20</sup> Brian Fay argues that Eliot rejects the “explanatory rationalism” of Spinoza, and develops a distinct understanding of imagination and perception.<sup>21</sup> Uncertainty about Spinoza's influence upon Eliot complicates her relationship to rationalism. But this is no dead end.

Eliot's definition of rationalism in "The Influence of Rationalism," which never references Spinoza, is a good starting place. It avoids the quandary of identifying one character or narrator with their author. As far as I know, no scholars start from this essay to approach Eliot's politics or her reception of Spinoza. Yet Eliot's definition of rationalism is political. She connects the "great conception of universal regular sequence" of fashionable opinion to religious toleration.<sup>22</sup> However, the rationalist characters in Eliot's novels are not themselves always tolerant of the religious and superstitious. They always run up against the sheer complexity of human beliefs and habits, especially irrational and religious attachments that have positive effects. Therefore, their reforms damage communities. Furthermore, Eliot's rationalist characters are often too arrogant to reflexively apply a rationalist lens upon their own motives, and a deficit of self-knowledge makes them oversimplify the world. Although Eliot's rationalist narrators probe the complex and hidden causes of human action and affect, her novels' ultimate evaluation of rationalist political reforms is often critical.

My essay argues that Eliot is a distinctly conservative rationalist, much like Basil Willey's classic account of the "conservative-reforming" Eliot in his *Nineteenth Century Studies*.<sup>23</sup> But unlike Willey, who never mentions Spinoza, I trace this influence that greatly interests contemporary scholars. First, I show how "The Influence of Rationalism" (1865) sifts Eliot's new definition of rationalism out of Victorian theological debates. Second, I argue that Eliot's definition of rationalism implicates Spinoza, even if it does not mention him. Third, I turn to the novels Eliot writes afterwards: *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1872), *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879)—ending as I begin with an overlooked text. I show how Eliot raises the complexity reflexivity problems in her last four novels, and emerges as a modest Spinozist who underlines the limits of rationalism as a political 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>24</sup> Kant’s distinction<sup>25</sup> between rationalism and empiricism has not yet taken hold; Victorians consider David Hume’s empiricist arguments against miracles as a contribution to “rationalism.”<sup>26</sup> The debate is mostly theological. John Henry Newman, most famously, explains that he left the Church of England for the Roman Catholic Church two decades earlier because he faced a choice between “Catholic Truth and Rationalism.”<sup>27</sup> In her less well-known *Broken Lights*, women’s rights activist Francis Power Cobbe defends rationalism, arguing that Christians ought to approach God through reason. Other Protestants decry rationalism. In a letter to Episcopal clergy in the United States, Charles Pettit McIlvanie argues rationalism merely updates eighteenth-century “infidelity” that attacks divine revelation in Scripture.<sup>28</sup> The Victorians recognize that Germany has overtaken England and France as the cutting-edge of rationalist thinking. W.E.H. Lecky’s two-volume *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism* traces these German roots of what becomes, by 1865, a broadly held opinion in many European countries, a “bias of reasoning” and a “cast of thought” that opposes claims from dogmatic theology, Church authority, and Biblical revelation.<sup>29</sup>

Eliot’s scathing review of Lecky, “The Influence of Rationalism” appears in the inaugural volume of *Fortnightly Review*, edited by her husband<sup>30</sup> George Henry Lewes. She starts 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 own mental character.”<sup>31</sup> (Ouch!) Eliot agrees with Lecky that rationalists’ weakened beliefs in

witchcraft and hell make them more tolerant.<sup>32</sup> But Eliot argues this is a more “painful proof” than Lecky realizes: 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>33</sup>

Gesturing at myriad causes that Lecky cannot explain, Eliot argues religious tolerance is not well-grounded doctrine. Lecky’s vague gestures to the “rationalist” spirit fails to explain how institutions, interests, affects, and habits bend society away from superstition and persecution.

“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>34</sup> Not content with the vague conventional definition, Eliot offers her own. 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 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>35</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. Rationalists hold that neither gods nor men govern the world, but natural laws, some understood by science and some yet to be discovered.

Eliot complains that Lecky ignores rationalists who would clearly reveal the connection between science and toleration:

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>36</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* (even then he judges its value to be “chiefly historical”).<sup>37</sup> Its translator, Eliot, may well disagree. Lecky skips from Descartes to Spinoza’s great critic Bayle, naming his *Dictionary* “more than any other work the foundation of modern rationalism.”<sup>38</sup> It is possible that Spinoza is Eliot’s missing rationalist who most powerfully informs the modern opinion that science can grasp external Reason—all the interests, habits, and affections of an entire multitude—by its causes.

## 2. Eliot on Spinoza’s Rationalism

To explain why Spinoza is likely the great rationalist whom Eliot thinks is missing from Lecky’s *History*, I shall briefly present Spinoza’s rationalism, then turn to Eliot’s understanding and evaluation Spinoza. Spinoza believes that what Eliot calls external Reason can be entirely understood, or at least that there is no principled reason why any event cannot 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>39</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>40</sup> Della Rocca argues that the PSR is the “key” to unlock Spinoza’s substance monism, rejection of free will, and moral psychology.<sup>41</sup> Even if Della Rocca overstates this,<sup>42</sup> the PSR reveals Spinoza’s confidence in what reason can discover. The affective and imaginative causes of even the most irrational behavior—even senseless violence and evil—can be intelligible to those who understand causes.<sup>43</sup> Spinoza’s strong conception of a ‘universal regular sequence’ of causes corresponds exactly with Eliot’s definition of rationalism.

It is now common to see Spinozism as “rationalism on steroids,” in Della Rocca’s phrase, but is this *Eliot’s* understanding of Spinoza?<sup>44</sup> This would offer circumstantial evidence that he is one ‘great writer’—if not *the* great writer—whom Eliot accuses Lecky of overlooking. Yet we should not immediately identify Eliot’s interpretation of Spinoza with Della Rocca’s. Armstrong and Gatens argue that the moral psychology of the *Ethics* most deeply influences Eliot, and Simon Calder contrasts this from her husband Lewes’s fascination with the opening metaphysical propositions of Part I, where the PSR is found.<sup>45</sup> However, Gatens and Nemoianu underscore that Eliot is not only partially interested in Spinoza; Gatens points out that Eliot double-underlines Spinoza’s statement in *Ethics* 2p17s, “*the mind does not err because it imagines.*”<sup>46</sup> Affect and imagination are part of the external Reason of human actions, especially when these causes are otherwise unknown to us. Eliot is interested in how much rationalists like Spinoza can understand as a practical matter. She is less confident Spinoza’s wise man of *Ethics* 5p57s, with his “soul scarce moved by external things,” can attain “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, she takes the full measure of Spinoza, who admits 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). 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>47</sup>

The rationalist Holy Grail, then, is a cipher to all these organic *irrational* affections, beliefs, and habits—to see the rational as actual and the actual as rational, as in Hegel’s famous motto.<sup>48</sup> The rationalist needs the Key to 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 oxymoronically 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 is sobering wisdom. 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>49</sup> In the novel, Felix Holt witnesses electioneering—liberals trade miners drinks for their votes in the town of Sproxtton—that tarnishes his democratic idealism and moderates his contempt for the gentry. He



sees most men “see nothing in an election but self-interest” and “greed” (FH 170).<sup>50</sup> Eliot/Holt reprises this theme in the “Address,” and urges workingmen to be patient with reforms. Society is a “wonderful slow-growing system” of interdependence in commerce, knowledge, and law, a complex and “delicate” web of causes. Eliot/Holt warns voting is “a terrible liability” since our blind pursuit of self-interest can endanger the fragile web of society.<sup>51</sup>

A decade before writing *Felix Holt*, Eliot already praised the conservative radical conspectus into which her character stumbles. She praises the “social-political conservatism... of a thoroughly philosophical kind” of the German folklorist Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl.<sup>52</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>53</sup> However, such reforms leave peasants worse off by eroding affections and habits with benefits that reformers cannot see. 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>54</sup> The theoretic scientist is less well-equipped to write the natural history of social bodies than the sensitive novelist or folklorist:

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>55</sup>

Realism in literature can prevent overeager reformism. Willey draws our attention to how Darwin’s theory of evolutionary development made a “feeble impression” upon Eliot compared to what she called “the mystery that lies under the process.”<sup>56</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* shows the educated are no less prone to dangerous ignorance. At its core is Dr. Casaubon's attempt to rationalize the complex beliefs of all times and peoples with a Key to All Mythologies. The rationalist narrator probes the causes of its characters' affections, beliefs, and habits, famously declaring, "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (M Finale: 795). Yet the narrator poses the difficulty knowing *how* we are so determined. Can we map this "web" and its "threadlike pressures" in all their "frustrating perplexity" (M 18:175)? Dr. Casaubon's Key to All Mythologies attempts to do this on a global scale, but Will Ladislaw disabuses Dorothea's idea that her husband's enterprise is viable. Ladislaw explains that the Germans have outpaced Casaubon and all English disciples of Jacob Bryant's *An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1776). Some critics like Kamila Walker focus on Casaubon's hubris,<sup>57</sup> but Fay reminds us that Dorothea thinks her husband's theory is "withered" from birth like an "elfin child" (M 48:458).<sup>58</sup> Fay 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>59</sup> The irrational affections, beliefs, and habits of the peoples of the world are simply too complex to be understood.<sup>60</sup>

Dorothea the "foundress of nothing" matures into a critic of her rationalist husband (M Prelude: 8), but Daniel Deronda is a rationalist who matures 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>61</sup> *Daniel Deronda* shows that the tempered rationalism in Eliot's novels is not antipolitical. Reformers ought to work through human beings' particular attachments to their heritage and to particular communities. Many Eliot scholars—James Arnett,

Nemoianu, and Michael Mack<sup>62</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), and Deronda’s *marrano* heritage also recalls Spinoza (see DD 50: 620). But Deronda reverses Spinoza’s trajectory. Spinoza leaves the Jewish community of his birth to assimilate into Dutch society. Assimilated into English society from birth, Deronda gradually discovers his membership in the Jewish community. Still, Spinoza does not figure as an assimilationist in the novel, which references Spinoza’s qualified belief that a Jewish state will be reestablished in the future (DD 52:532).<sup>63</sup> Both the narrator and Deronda link rationalism to local and national attachments, as 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)

Deronda does not learn to read the invisible history of the human beings around him completely or infallibly, nor is this necessary for his political project. His rationalism avoids the arrogance of Eliot’s other rationalist characters because he is aware the complexity of the world exceeds his understanding.

Deronda and his mentor Mordecai are modest rationalists. From studying Kabbalah,<sup>64</sup> Mordecai’s thoughts seem “closely inwoven with the growth of things,” and he hopes for a “second soul” ready to absorb his ideas and carry them forward (DD 38: 473; cf. 43: 540).<sup>65</sup>

When Mordecai brings Deronda to “The Philosophers” club to debate causes of social change,<sup>66</sup> his acolyte argues for tempered rationalism

‘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).

Mordecai approves. Unlike Casaubon, Deronda’s introspective rationalism accounts for uncertainty in any social change. Deronda’s friend Hans Meyrick attributes Deronda’s “supreme reasonableness” to the fact that his friend is always prepared for the worst (DD 52: 643).

Deronda’s Zionist hope, as Henry points out, remains just that at the end of the book.<sup>67</sup> He can educate the main protagonist of the novel, Gwendolen Harleth, but fails to bring his own mother beyond her bitterness towards Judaism.

Deronda cannot be Spinoza’s wise man. The wise man’s perspective would make narrative impossible. Recall Gardner’s argument that Eliot’s decision to write novels is a break with Spinoza.<sup>68</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. Felix Holt would not need to learn from the electioneering in Sproxton. We would not need realistic accounts of particular human beings in their manifold differences, only a psychological master theory. As an introspective rationalist resigned to a world teeming with unknowns, Deronda instructs us in ways Spinoza does not.

In Eliot’s last novel, the more obscure and ironic *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, her critique of rationalism is most intense, even sardonic. Theophrastus considers the “increasing uncertainty which modern progress has thrown over relations of the mind and body” (ITS 11).<sup>69</sup> He lampoons his friend Merman who, against his wife’s good sense, unhappily tries to establish a “new view of social origins” by reference to the ways of the “Macigodumbras and Zuzumotzis” (ITS 41 and 43). If Merman is a comical Casaubon, Spike is a comic Holt.

Theophrastus wryly concludes the story of the radical impervious to knowledge: “The depths of

middle-aged gentlemen's ignorance will never be known, for want of public examinations in this branch" (ITS 93). This is Eliot's most acidic reflection on the reflexivity problem. Human beings are like 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, and bereft of both self-knowledge and (probably) friends who know us any better (ITS 113). Rationalism is no help to us. The "full extension of the *a priori* method" will only show that "only blockheads could expect anything to be otherwise" (ITS 149). Eliot's almost whimsical last book, parts delightful and sad, retraces the limits of rationalist knowledge.

In Theophrastus the rationalist's desire for the world to conform to reason is his or her downfall. The "seer, whether prophet, philosopher, scientific discoverer, or poet" must keep a "sanity of expectation" (ITS 156-7). A Deronda is saved only by his modest expectations of his knowledge. If this desire is unchecked, rationalism lends itself to "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>70</sup> Theophrastus argues there is no substitute: "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>71</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, then.

### Conclusion

Eliot’s essay on rationalism, her work on Spinoza, and the presence of rationalism and Spinoza in her last four novels reveal the limits of this new faith to completely account for all the attachments, beliefs, and habits in the world. This essay has taken a different route, but arrives at the same basic contours of Willey’s classic portrayal of Eliot as a resigned and distinctly conservative rationalist. Like the narrator of *Silas Marner*, Eliot worries that rationalists can oversimplify the world. The famously tolerant rationalist becomes the opposite in the arrogant rush to reform: “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). Eliot invests her Spinozist inheritance wisely, raising sensitive challenges and sensible doubts that rationalism always provides an adequate map for political reform.

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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> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Clare Carlisle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 205.

<sup>5</sup> See the contribution in this volume by Richard Avramenko.

<sup>6</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.

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and politics,” pp. 138-158, in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 141.

<sup>8</sup> Evan Horowitz, “George Eliot: The Conservative,” *Victorian Studies* 49.1 (2006): 7-32.

<sup>9</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>10</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>11</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>12</sup> John O. McGinnis, “Marriage, Market, and Politics in *Middlemarch*,” *Law & Liberty*, 28 February 2018.

<sup>13</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>14</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>15</sup> David Kurnick, “Unspeakable George Eliot,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38 (2010): 489-509.

<sup>16</sup> Like Willey, these focus on Feuerbach and Strauss. See 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>17</sup> Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Romantic Reassessment 78 (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1978).

<sup>18</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>19</sup> Virgil Martin Nemoianu, “The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (2010): 65-81, 79; James Arnett, “Daniel Deronda, Professor of Spinoza,” in *Victorian Literature and Culture* 44 (2016): 833-854. However, see also Robert Preyer, “Beyond the Liberal Imagination: Vision and Unreality in *Daniel Deronda*,” *Victorian Studies* 4 (1960).

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

<sup>21</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

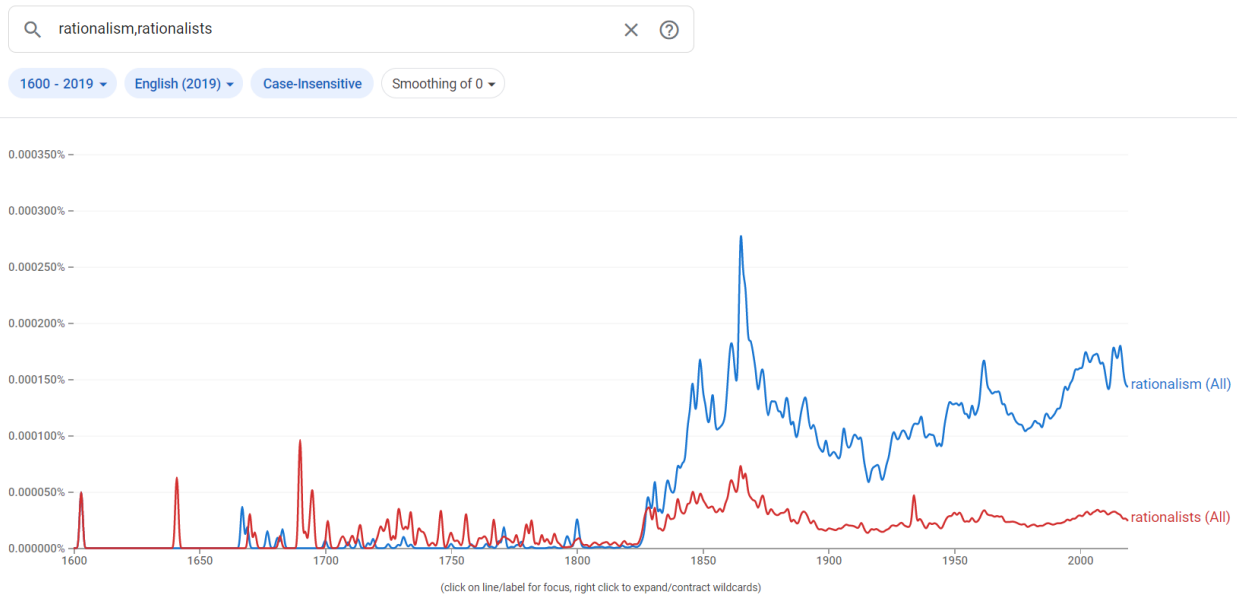
open question in Moira Gatens, “Compelling Fictions: Spinoza and George Eliot on Imagination and Belief,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 20.1 (2012): 74-90.

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

<sup>23</sup> Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Cambridge to Matthew Arnold*, 207 and 238.

<sup>24</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



<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 498.

<sup>26</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.

<sup>27</sup> John Henry Newman, *A History of My Religious Opinions* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865), 102.

<sup>28</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>29</sup> W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, I:16-17. 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>30</sup> Lewes was legally married to another woman, who in turn lived with another partner. The law did not recognize his marriage to Eliot.



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- <sup>31</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>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.
- <sup>37</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.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, II:66.
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (London: Routledge, 2008), 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, 80.
- <sup>41</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 8.
- <sup>42</sup> For instance, see Yitzhak Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88-99 and 196.
- <sup>43</sup> See Robert Wyllie, *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, eds. Gene Callahan and Kenneth B. McIntyre (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 49.
- <sup>44</sup> Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, 4.
- <sup>45</sup> Isobel Armstrong, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions," 298-9; Simon Calder, "George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Ethics of Literature," 170.
- <sup>46</sup> Moira Gatens, "The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot," 79.
- <sup>47</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," pp. 266-299 in *Essays of George Eliot*, 287.
- <sup>48</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.
- <sup>49</sup> George Eliot, "Address to Working Men, By Felix Holt," *Essays of George Eliot*, 429.
- <sup>50</sup> George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 170.
- <sup>51</sup> George Eliot, "Address to Working Men, By Felix Holt," *Essays of George Eliot*, 420-1.
- <sup>52</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, 287.
- <sup>53</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, 282.
- <sup>54</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, 289-90.
- <sup>55</sup> George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, 271.
- <sup>56</sup> Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, 238.
- <sup>57</sup> Kamila Walker, "Casaubon: A Case of Shameful False Pride in Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *The Explicator* 76.2 (2018): 88-95.
- <sup>58</sup> Brian Fay, "What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza," 134n19.
- <sup>59</sup> Brian Fay, "What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* Could Have Taught Spinoza," 130.
- <sup>60</sup> Fay argues Ladislaw 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>61</sup> Quoted in Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1918), 116.

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<sup>62</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>63</sup> Benedict Spinoza, *Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. Martin D. Yaffe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 42.

<sup>64</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>65</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>66</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>67</sup> Nancy Henry pushes back against Edward W. Said here, charging him with anachronism in condemning Eliot’s “Zionism”. See Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and politics,” 155.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Villanueva Gardner, *Women Philosophers: Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>69</sup> George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), 11.

<sup>70</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).

<sup>71</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.