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Shaping God in Modernity: From Descartes to Spinoza

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Both Descartes and Spinoza are credited with pushing medieval thought toward modernity, but their respective foci on questions pertaining to God are very different from each other; they are informed, in part, by their respective experiences as a Catholic and a Jew. Descartes' thought is shaped within and against a Jesuit context; Spinoza's thought is shaped within and against a rabbinic context. Each pushes beyond those contexts. Descartes began his education at a Jesuit institution barely two years after the Jesuits had been permitted to return to France; he spent most of his mature adult life away from France—in the Netherlands. Spinoza was a brilliant pre-rabbinical student in Amsterdam, part of a—specifically Sephardic Jewish—community the leadership of which attacked his thinking in part because of their experience and fear of the Catholic Inquisition as it had developed in the Iberia from which most of them had come not long before. Whereas Descartes' Discourse on the Method and Meditations famously introduce the issue of radical doubt, when he arrives at his proof of God's existence, his method follows a process shaped centuries earlier by St Anselm of Canterbury; Spinoza introduces an entirely new vocabulary for God in his Ethics and his Theologico-Political Treatise—new enough so that his panhenotheistic perspective was and often is confused with both pantheism and atheism. They open doors into modern thought regarding God and the divine interface with humanity. The implications extend from their era to our own.

Introduction

As much as both Descartes and Spinoza are credited with pushing medieval thought toward modernity, their respective foci on questions pertaining to God—informed, in part, by their respective experiences as a Catholic (albeit with close connections to the Protestant world) and a Jew—are significantly different. Descartes' thought is itself shaped within and against a Jesuit context; Spinoza's thought is shaped within and against a rabbinic context. The thinking of each is honed by an important intellectual-spiritual tradition, but each pushes beyond the bounds of his tradition.

Descartes's Complexly Catholic Life

Descartes (1596-1650) is largely seen as responsible for the increased attention given to epistemology in the 17th century. He is credited with laying the foundations for 17th-century continental rationalism as a systematic school of philosophy. Although his family was Roman Catholic, the Poitou region where he was born and raised was controlled by the Protestant Huguenots. He was schooled at a Jesuit institution, but the initial fulfillment of his ambition to become a professional military

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officer came when, in 1618, he joined the Protestant Dutch States Army in Breda, as a mercenary, under the command of Maurice of Nassau. According to his first biographer, Adrien Baillet, (1649-1706) on the night of November 10–11, 1619 (St. Martin's Day), while stationed in Neuburg an der Donau, Descartes shut himself in a room with a stove to escape the cold. While there he had three dreams, and believed that a divine spirit had revealed to him a new philosophy.

He left the army the following year and travelled somewhat before returning to France, spending time in Paris during the next few years, but returning to the Dutch Republic in 1628. In 1629, he attended the University of Franeker, in Friesland, either living with a Catholic family or renting in the Sjaerdemaslot castle. The next year, under the name "Poitevin," he enrolled at Leiden University—a Protestant institution. He studied both mathematics and astronomy. In Amsterdam, he had a relationship with Helena Jans van der Strom, with whom he had a daughter, Francine, who was born in 1635 and baptized a Protestant. She died of scarlet fever at the age of 5. Descartes wept and was prompted to write about the validity of human emotion and its expression in *The Passions of the Soul*. Significantly, he wrote all of his major work during his more than 20 years in the Netherlands, initiating a revolution in mathematics and philosophy.

By 1649 Descartes had become famous. Queen Christina of Sweden invited him to her court to organize a new scientific academy and tutor her in his ideas about love. Descartes accepted, and moved to Sweden in mid-winter. The Queen was interested in and stimulated Descartes to publish *The Passions of the Soul*. On February 1, 1650, he contracted pneumonia and died on 11 February. In his 2009 book, German philosopher Theodor Ebert argued that Descartes was poisoned by Jacques Viogué, a Catholic missionary who opposed his religious views.[1] As evidence, Ebert suggests that Catherine Descartes, Descartes' niece, made a veiled reference to the poisoning when her uncle was administered "communion" two days before his death, in her 1693 *Report on the Death of M. Descartes, the Philosopher*.[2]

Embedded for decades in the Protestant world, Descartes considered himself to be a devout Catholic, and one of the purposes of the *Meditations* was to defend the Catholic faith. His attempt to ground theological beliefs on reason nonetheless encountered intense opposition in his time. Blaise Pascal (1623-42) accused him of deism, and the renowned Dutch polymath, Martin Schoock (1614-69), accused him of atheist beliefs—although Descartes had offered an explicit critique of atheism in his *Meditations*. The Catholic Church prohibited his books in 1663.

Descartes' Journey from the *Cogito* to a Proof of God's Perfection, Infinity and Existence

Descartes' best-known (and for our purposes most important) pair of philosophical works—part of the beginning of modern philosophy—*The Discourse on the Method* and *The Meditations on First Philosophy,* were published in 1637 and 1641 respectively.

[1]Theodor Ebert, *Der rästelhafte Tod des René Descartes* (in German).
[2]See Theodor Ebert, "Did Descartes Die of Poisoning?" *Early Science and Medicine*, 142–185.

In his first *Discourse* he notes that, after reverencing theology and philosophy he eventually emerged "from the tutelage of my teachers [and] abandoned the study of letters altogether, and resolv[ed] to study no other mode of knowing than that which I could find within myself or else in the great book of the world." Thus "I learned not to believe too firmly those things that I had been persuaded to accept by example and custom only; and in this way I freed myself gradually from many errors that obscure the natural light of our understanding and render us less capable of reason." His goal was to understand reality entirely through reason. Although the "faith" that he has abandoned pertains to what he learned from his teachers (and has therefore learned only indirectly) could (and perhaps will) in the end also pertain to the sort of faith we engage when we consider God.

The second and third *Discourses* lead him and his readers to the radical new idea that he arrives at in *Discourse 4* in the context of his stated conviction "to concentrate solely on the search for truth," which includes abandoning any reliance on the senses, "because our senses sometimes play us false." For example (mine, not Descartes'): while walking in the early fog-ridden morning on the beach, from 120 yards away I imagine that I am seeing a dog, but when I get within 20 yards of it, I realize that what I am seeing is a fireplug—but then why do I suppose that my deceiving eyes are any more truthful at 20 yards than at 120 yards, or at one yard, for that matter? Could I still be mistaken? So Descartes will reject the testimony of his senses as unreliable, as well as rejecting "as false all the reasonings [particularly those passed on from others] I had hitherto accepted as proofs."

He determines to start from ground level, asking whether there is anything of which we can be absolutely certain? Well "while I decided to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought this must be something; and observing that this truth: *I am thinking therefore I am*, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking." The one thing of which he decides that he can be certain is that he exists, since however much he doubts anything and everything, there must be a "he"—a Rene Descartes—who is doing the doubting.[3]

He goes on to imagine that he had no body: still his thinking would prove his existence and, moreover *what he is*, as opposed to *that he is*, is a thinking being, "a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking….so that this 'I', that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body.. [and] even if the body were not, it [the 'I'] would not cease to be all that it is." Moreover, he continues,

[3]This iconic formulation is typically rendered as "I think, therefore I am," In English. Please indulge my linguistic pomposity: In both Latin, *Cogito*, and in French, its equivalent, *Je pense*, may be translated into English as "I think," or "I do think," or "I am thinking." English offers nuances in its present-tense verbal forms that Latin and French do not. "I think" refers to my *capacity* to think, whereas "I am thinking" refers to the fact that, right now, I am engaged in the *process* of thinking. Clearly Descartes has the latter in mind: it is the fact that he is in the process of having the thoughts that he is having that proves his existence. Hence my translation.

> …reflecting on the fact that I had doubts and that consequently my being was not completely perfect, for I saw clearly that it was a greater perfection to know than to doubt, I decided to inquire whence I had learned to think of something more perfect than myself; and I clearly recognized that this must have been from some nature that was in fact more perfect… for to hold it from nothing was something manifestly impossible; and because it is no less contradictory that the more perfect should proceed from and depend on the less perfect, than it is that something should emerge out of nothing,[4] I could not hold it from myself; with the result that it remained that it must have been put into me by a being whose nature was truly more perfect than mine and which even had in itself all the perfections of which I could have any idea, that is to say, in a single word, which was God…. There must of necessity be another more perfect, upon whom I depended, and from whom I had acquired all I had…
> …because I had already recognized in myself very clearly that intelligent nature is distinct from the corporeal, considering that all composition [entities composed of more than one element] is evidence of dependency, and that dependency is manifestly a defect, I thence judged that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of these two natures, and that, consequently, He was not so composed…
> …I found that existence was comprised of the idea [of perfection] in the same way that the equality of the three angles of a triangle to two right angles is comprised in the idea of a triangle or, as in the idea of a sphere, the fact that all its parts are equidistant from its center, or even more obviously so; and that consequently it is at least as certain that God, who is this perfect being is, or exists, as any geometric demonstration can be.

A sequence of issues intersects in the discussion in the fourth *Discourse*, from which I have quoted the essential parts. The idea of an absolutely certain proposition: the certainty that I, who am engaged in the process of thinking, doubting, asking questions, necessarily exists. The reduction of what I am to the intelligence that is thusly engaged, apart from my physical being—and even if it should turn out that my physical being is an illusion. The notion that, as a being who doubts and needs to ask, I am imperfect. The idea of perfection and the question of what would be the source for my idea of perfection, given that I myself am imperfect. The conclusion that I can only have gotten the idea from a perfect being—and that such a being is called "God." The further conclusion that God, as a perfect being, must be as perfectly singular as a sphere or a triangle would be: as such geometric forms are by definition comprised, respectively, of an entity of which its three angles equal two right angles or one from which every single inch of its periphery is exactly the same distance from its center.

One might make three observations about this discussion, once it has arrived to the God issue. One is that the closest approximation that Descartes can provide to divine perfection is the idea of perfect mathematical ideas which exist as Ideas (in the Platonic sense): there are no absolutely perfect triangles or spheres in the immanent realm in which we exist. The second is that he is standing on the shoulders of the Aristotelian-style articulation, by St Anselm of Canterbury, of the *Ontological Argument*, as a signal part of the by-then centuries-long Christian tradition of needing to prove God's existence—as an exercise, since no medieval Christian actually doubts

[4]There is some (unintended) irony in his use of this phrase, since it references a line from the poem, *De Rerum Natura—nihil ex nihilo fit* (*"nothing comes from nothing"*)—by the 1st century BCE Roman poet, Lucretius. The poem is an exposition of the thinking of Epicurus, who, by the way, seriously doubts the existence of the gods.

God's existence—although Descartes stretches further. If there is a flaw in Descartes' discussion it is the *given*—analogous to a mathematical given—that God exists and that God is defined as a perfect being—which is one of the flaws in Anselm's original argument.

Descartes' conclusion is that there must be a perfect being—God—because the concept "perfection" exists in his mind (his primary premise) and that he, an imperfect being, couldn't conceive of the idea of perfection and of a perfect being (his secondary premise) himself. So the syllogism is *restructured*—God as a perfect being is not a given (Anselm's primary premise), nor that it is simply more perfect to exist than not to exist (Anselm's secondary premise)—but both thinkers nonetheless arrive at the same incontrovertible conclusion: that God as a perfect being must exist. But what if that perfect being is not what Descartes, Anselm, and others think of as God? What if, like the idea of a perfect sphere or triangle, it doesn't exist but somehow we can make the leap of theological intellect to conceive of a perfect God as we make the leap of geometric intellect, from not-quite perfect forms, to conceive of a perfect triangle or sphere? There is a circularity to both of their arguments in the end, revolving around the notion that God *is* and is defined as *perfect*.

The third observation is that these concerns are not abandoned by Descartes after the discussion in the *Discourse on the Method*; on the contrary, he returns to them and expands upon them four years later in his *Meditations*. He turns again, in his *First Meditation*, to the issue of the unreliability of the senses and more broadly, comparative nature and doubt. In returning to the starting point of doubting, his first step out of doubt is to point out, from a different angle, that there are certain things the existence of which I can be certain, so that even under conditions when I am imagining actions involving those things (I am asleep in my bed and dream/imagine that my hand is being bitten by a dog or that I am running along the beach; the actions are not taking place, but the hand and legs that I imagine engaged in these actions exist)—which he immediately thereafter distinguishes from imagined entities that don't exist, such as Sirens and Satyrs. Similarly, in the realm of "arithmetic, geometry and other sciences of this nature… whether I am awake or sleeping, two and three added together always make five, and a square never has more than four sides."

This drives him rather rapidly toward the question of God's existence, in the very next paragraph:

> I have for a long time had in my mind the belief that there is a God who is all-powerful and by whom I was created and made as I am… [But] it is possible that God has wished that I should be deceived every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square.
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> …I shall suppose …that there is not a true God, who is the sovereign source of truth, but some evil demon, no less cunning and deceiving than powerful, who has used all his artifice to deceive me [about these things].

He has upped the ante with regard to doubt by including the existence of God in the traditional way in which he has defined God among the totality of what he will doubt.

This brings him, in his *Second Meditation*, to suppose that "there is some deceiver both very powerful and very cunning who uses his wiles to deceive me. *There is therefore no doubt that I exist*, if he deceives me; and let him deceive me as much as

he likes, he can never cause me to be nothing: *so long as I am thinking I am something*" (both emphases added). So the first important issue raised in the *Discourse* is re-affirmed in the *Meditations*: that the fact that I think—and the concomitants of thinking, including dreaming, hallucinating, and doubting—prove that I exist; that I may be reduced, in a sense, to a *res cogitans* (a "thinking thing"); that, however, the fact that I doubt makes me imperfect; the idea of "perfection" must therefore come from outside myself, which means that there must be a perfect being, and that perfect being is God.

In his *Third Meditation* Descartes returns to this last part of the edifice of reality that he has rebuilt, and asserts:

> There remains, then, only the idea of God, in which I must consider whether there is anything that could not have come from me. By the name of God, I understand an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things exist (if it be true that any such exist) have been created and produced.[5] But these attributes are so great and eminent, that the more attentively I consider them, the less I am persuaded that the idea that I have of them can originate in me alone. And consequently, I must necessarily conclude from all I have said hitherto, that God exists; for, although the idea of substance is in me, for the very reason that I am a substance, I would not, nevertheless, have the idea of an infinite substance, since I am a finite being, unless the idea had been put into me by some substance that was truly infinite.

So not only does the concept of perfection come from a perfect being that must, then, exist, (lest it be less than perfect), but the concept of infinity must also come from an infinite being, which being must therefore necessarily exist—and God is both perfect and infinite and must therefore exist.

As much as Descartes introduces a new series of angles—stepping beyond Anselm, and medieval Christian thought—from which to arrive at an irrefutable proof of God's existence, he is necessarily still embedded in the same circular syllogistic reasoning as they are. He has simply changed the specific terms of the syllogism slightly: instead of it being "more perfect to be (exist) than not to be (exist)," the concept of "perfection" (as well as the concept of "infinity") cannot have entered my mind except through a being that is perfect (and infinite). He, like Anselm, is still beginning from a definitional *given* regarding God—that God is both perfect and infinite as well as contrived of a series of extraordinary attributes that cannot, by the way, be separated from each other within God's singular substance—as well as embracing as a given the notion that the concepts of perfection and infinity can only enter my consciousness from such a source.

One could argue that even what I imagine as perfect or infinite is not—that I am incapable of really grasping *absolute* perfection or infinity, since these properties don't exist in my immanent reality—or conversely that, as much as I can conceive of the idea of a perfect triangle or square, none actually exists in our immanent reality;

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[5]It is important, lest we get confused, to keep in mind that what is being rendered here as "substance" is not the common-parlance usage of the term to imply something with a concrete physical reality (for example, flesh and blood), but on the contrary, following the lead of Aristotle, is a more-than-physical concept, referring to the "essential reality" of the entity (in this case, God, as opposed, say, to humans) whose substance is under discussion.

we just imagine and understand what these ideas are by inferring from the nearly-perfect but not quite perfect triangles and squares that we can find or make in our own reality.

In the end we come back to the beginning of the same (im)perfect circle: God's existence is proven by and for those who believe both in God's existence and that God is defined as thinkers like Anselm and Descartes define God. If, for the sake of argument, I don't believe in God or in that kind of God, then their arguments fall short.

Spinoza's Complicated Jewish Life and His Anti-Supercessionim

There are, however, other directions in which the God question leads into early modern thought in the West. One of the starting points of "modern" philosophy—the thinking of Descartes—is more connected to traditional medieval Christian beliefs and concerns than one might at first suppose—it is engaged in proving the existence of a God conceived as having attributes that add up to perfection, one of which attributes is in fact to exist—yet it begins to push open doors through which others will walk. Descartes spent more than twenty years living in different parts of the Netherlands, including three stretches of more than a year each in Amsterdam. Among the individuals he influenced was a former Jesuit free-freethinker, by the name of Franciscus van den Enden, who would later become the teacher of Latin and mentor to the young Jewish thinker, Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632–77).

Spinoza was a brilliant student—whose teachers may have hoped that he would become a rabbi—in the Sephardic community that traced its origins to Portugal and Spain and found refuge in a city that was the capital of a republic that had both gained political independence from Spain in the late sixteenth century, and that also remained largely open to diverse religious beliefs. Spinoza would transform the vocabulary of philosophy with regard to the relationship between immanence and transcendence—the vocabulary of referencing God—and so further the journey of philosophy into a new era.

Spinoza's thought is antithetical to—even hostile to—traditional religious thinking, if we understand such thinking as based on narrow considerations of "chosenness." Thus the two religious communities with which he was most intimately familiar, the Jewish and the Christian, each thought of itself as uniquely chosen by God with regard to a covenantal relationship, and as such, spiritually superior to the other (as well as to all others).[6] The main thrust of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* is to undercut this sort of sensibility.[7] He asserts that the biblical text itself offers a God who proclaims, "My Name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered in My Name, and a pure offering; for My Name is great among the heathen,

[6]The Jews interpreted their relationship to the Israelite-Judaean past and the unique Covenant with God embraced by the Israelites at and beyond Sinai as a condition of divine preference; the Christians interpreted the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the *mashiah/khristos* as having led to God's rejection of Jews as chosen: that Christianity had superseded Judaism in God's affections.
[7]As Steven Nadler concisely notes, he sought pointblank to disabuse his reader of the notion that God, through Moses, had authored the Torah, as opposed to human beings. See Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*, 18.

says the Lord of Hosts," and that such words "abundantly testify that the Jews of that time were not more beloved by God than other nations."[8] This is part of a lengthy argument part of the point of which is to assert, among other things, that supersessionist ideas of any sort miss the point of true religion.

Spinoza may be understood to be the beginning point of a modernist approach to analyzing and understanding the Bible. The *Theologico-Political Treatise* is precisely that: the first work that exhaustively and in detail considers the text of the Bible in a manner that may be considered both rational and very little affected by particularist prejudices. Indeed, consistent with this non-particularist viewpoint, although Spinoza's primary focus is the Hebrew Bible, he makes no distinction between it and the New Testament as "Bible." Trained as a Jewish biblical scholar, he demonstrates his viewpoint that is both Christian and Jewish—or rather, neither of these, per se. His statement that "the Bible clearly implies that God has a form, and that Moses when he heard God speaking was permitted to behold it, or at least its hinder part,"[9] reflects a remarkably literalist reading for someone trained in the Jewish rabbinic tradition that considers any reference to physicality with respect to God as allegorical. Viewing God as having a physical aspect would be considered heretical from a Jewish viewpoint—half a step from outright apostasy.

One must keep in mind that Spinoza's community, including the rabbis who would pronounce the *heirem* against him,[10] was not simply a Sephardic community, but one that had been melted in the crucible of several generations of forced or at least unhappy conversions, in the course of which—as Yirmiyahu Yovel points out in his magisterial volume, *The Marrano of Reason*—they had necessarily shaped what, in effect, was an offspring between traditional Jewish and traditional Christian thought that was different from either parent.[11] He asserts that for many crypto-Jews, the lives that they led in the face of the Inquisition (hiding their Judaism or, even if not, facing

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[8]Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M., Elwes, chap. 3, p. 48. This edition is a reprint of the Bohn Library Edition containing the R. H. M. Elwes translation of the Latin original published by George Bell Camp & Sons in 1883.

[9]Ibid, 17.

[10]The *heirem* was the rabbinic excommunication that completely cut off the individual so-designated from the community. Given the fact that Judaism lacks a real "hell" concept or even a proper term for hell in Hebrew, the implications are entirely related to the here and now and not the thereafter. The verbiage of the Amsterdam *heirem*s meted out against Spinoza and several others (see fn 13) emulated the Catholic style in invoking God and the angels and damning the individual, but even so, without post-mortem implications.

[11]Yovel's work, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* consists of two volumes, *The Marrano of Reason* and *The Adventures in Immanence*, in which he also seeks to redeem the community that spat Spinoza out as broader-thinking and more worldly than is traditionally thought. I beg to disagree, at least where the key *heirem*-pronouncing rabbinic figure, Saul Morteira was concerned (although he was a serious intellectual of sorts)—and am inclined to agree where Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel was concerned. But that's a story for another day. More importantly, he argues that Spinoza's reduction of reality to immanence (first volume) paved the way to the Enlightenment and secularism (second volume). As will be obvious from what follows, I believe that Spinoza found the transcendent God in the immanent world, not reducing everything to immanence, but changing the vocabulary of both transcendence and immanence. Other excellent recent works presenting the context of Spinoza's life and thought include Steven Nadler's *Spinoza: A Life*, and Rebecca Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave US Modernity*. Both do enviable jobs of weaving the biography with the thinking that pushed his era into position as the beginning of our own era.

the constant fear if not of discovery then of accusation) "mixed Judaism and Christianity in ways that undermined both religions and led to rational skepticism and secularism, and to an opposition between inner and outer life, …. a this-worldly disposition, a split religious identity, metaphysical skepticism, a quest for salvation that opposes the official doctrine, an opposition between inner belief and the outer world" and a gift for what was essential for survival: equivocation and the use of language with dual meanings.[12]

Spinoza was not the first nor the last to be accused of heretical beliefs in the Amsterdam Sephardic congregation, but the most extraordinary, and the one whose reshaping of traditional Jewish and Christian thought blew open further than Descartes the door to modernity.[13] But Spinoza never *abandoned* his Judaism for Christianity—although he was forced (or chose) to leave the Jewish community—for to trade one particularist creed for another would not have been an appropriate path for a seeker of universalist truth.

His departure came from accusations of apostasy—although at the time he had not yet written the works that those of limited minds would construe that way—as an outcome (to be brief) of a property dispute with his half-sister and her husband, and his decision to take the matter to the Dutch court for adjudication, rather than the community rabbinical court. The rabbis were ego-struck, but also fearful that the Dutch Reform majority might respond by removing the welcome mat from Iberian Jews, and/or that, in the Age of Religious wars, Catholicism and with it the Inquisition, might regain political and religious control of the Dutch Republic.

Refusing to respond to, much less to recant, the heretical charges leveled against him, Spinoza was exiled from the community—not something that seems to have disturbed him overly much. In exile from the community, he ground lenses for a living and wrote assiduously. Included within Spinoza's thinking is the beginning of an idea for which he would perhaps become best known—and most commonly misunderstood: a kind of equation of God with Nature: "Nature herself is the power of God under another name, and our ignorance of God is co-extensive with our ignorance of Nature."[14] Later on, in the *Ethics*, he would use the phrase *Deus sive Natura*—"God or Nature" (Part IV, Prop IV, Proof)[15] —to summarize that equation. But in the sentence that immediately precedes the one that I quoted from the *Treatise*, he observes that "[e]verything takes place by the power of God," which statement is part of his articulation of God's omnipresence and engagement in the world.

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[12]Yoval, *Adventures*, Preface, IX-X.

[13]I would mention just two others: Uriel Acosta, the former Catholic ecclesiastic who left Portugal in order to return to the Judaism from which his ancestors had been force-converted, but found it impossible to reconcile his own view of "proper" Judaism with that of the rabbis—and committed suicide when Spinoza was seven years old; and the physician, Juan de Prado (not to be confused with a Catholic priest of the same name who was martyred by the Muslims).

[14]Ibid, 25.

[15]Where the *Ethics* are concerned I am not referring to page numbers since the sections in *Works of Spinoza: On the Improvement of the Understanding*, *Ethic*s, *Selected Letters*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, are discreet enough for anyone to easily locate.

Spinoza's Turn to New Terminology for God

This is hardly the perspective of an atheist—of which perspective Spinoza was accused by many of his contemporaries—or of one who views God as the power that engendered our reality and then turned away from it, leaving us on our own to find *telos* ("goal," "purpose") in our existence by ourselves.[16]

His turn to new terminology constitutes a small but critical revolution toward "modern" thought. Thus by "nature" (*natura*), he means God, literally (to repeat) equating God and Nature—also equating them in part IV, Preface, with "eternal and infinite Being." He may be said to have a threefold intention with this formulation. One: to replace a *personified* understanding of God with something that, in lacking a personified condition, lacks a *personalized* relationship with humans (or with creation in general). As such, "God" would certainly appear to be other than God as that term is traditionally used by Christians and Jews, for such a God might be construed as an entity that created the world but, having done so, retains no particular interest in its progress through time. So, too, those slaughtering others in the name of God do so by being possessive of that personified and therefore personal God.

Such a God, however, *might* be construed as one that created the world and then turned away from it. But everything that Spinoza says about God, whether he uses the term *Deus* or the term *Natura*, militates *against* the understanding of God as disengaged: the complete verbal equation that he offers—between *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* ("nature naturing" and "nature natured")—at the very least suggests a more intimate relationship between God and creation, since by definition, given this pair of phrases, God is embedded within us, within the natural world—within everything. This is a panhenotheistic (aka panentheistic) view of the one (*heno*) God (*theos*) embedded in everything (*pan*).

Of course, one could still suppose that the mind of God becomes disconnected from creation once that mind has finished creating: a father can deposit part of himself (sperm) into what eventuates as his offspring and, having done so, disappear without ever having a relationship with that offspring. But that is clearly not his view. Those who saw or see Spinoza as disconnecting a personified God from creation would be missing both the third aspect of understanding the *Deus sive Natura* equation and Spinoza's own discussion of God that peppers the *Ethics*. In the first place, that third aspect is by means of the rabbinic notion of God's Name as *ineffable*. Whatever term one uses falls short—humans simply lack the capacity for such knowledge—every term is ultimately a circumlocution for God's true Name, particularly if, like Spinoza, we understand what a *name* is in traditional terms: that it conveys the essence of its bearer. How can humans convey absolute and perfect Being in words developed in an imperfect world of predication, where everything that exists, exists *as* something?

Spinoza recognizes this and alludes to the conversation between Moses and God in Exodus 3:14—in which the latter responds to Moses's question to God regarding who God is ("who shall I say sent me?") with the words "I am/will be that am/will

[16]Among those arguing not only against the accusation of Spinoza as an atheist, but noting that his panhenotheistic view was consistent with certain previous rabbinic discussions, in particular Maimonides, is Yitzhak Y, Melamid, in his chapter, "Spinoza's 'Atheism', the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus Theologici-Politicus*," in Garber, et al, *Spinoza: Reason, Religion, & Politics*.

be." He writes of Moses's understanding of God as "a Being Who has always existed, does exist, and will always exist, and for this cause he calls Him by the name J-H-V-H ["isness"]."[17] This important moment of biblical exegesis becomes the basis for Spinoza's statement that "the existence of God and His essence are one and the same" (Part I, Prop. XX). God is the only Being of which this may be stated: *that* God is, is *what* God is, and *what* God is, is *that* God is. God and God's mind, like God and God's Name, are one and the same and not only eternal but the *same* as eternity.

Embedded within this—and embellished by other, related issues that fall outside the range of this brief discussion—are several further issues to which I would draw particular attention. One is that everything Spinoza writes about God, no matter how rational the arguments, is both predicated on his belief, like that of Descartes, when all is said and done, that such a God—a God of pure Being, of all-encompassing infinity, eternity, and perfection: all-everything—*exists*, and to whatever extent he might wish to prove God's existence, say, by reference to Scripture, he is caught up in the circularity that is inevitable and inherent in dealing with the realm of the unknown in its divine aspect.

Circularity in Reasoning About God

Spinoza's discussion is circular on two levels. It is circular because in validating its points by reference to the Scriptures, it takes them to be the unquestionable word of God (which is a function of belief and not objectively provable) and because, as with Descartes, it presupposes not only God's existence, but God as commonly defined: all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good, and interested and involved in our world. In commenting, for example, on the issue of false revelations, he notes that "God never deceives the good, nor His chosen, but (according to the ancient proverb, and as appears in the history of Abigail and her speech), God uses the good as instruments of goodness and the wicked as means to execute his wrath…(28)."[18] Indeed, to repeat, far from being heretical, much less atheist, Spinoza's sense of God is perfectly consistent with the traditions he has inherited; where he diverges from those traditions is in his unequivocal non-nonsectarian viewpoint (that God is not drawn more to one group than to another) and in the introduction of terminology that has been too often misconstrued—first by his own contemporaries and then by subsequent commentators.

That circularity is most concisely—and perhaps unconsciously—expressed in the *Ethics* (Part II, Prop. XI, Proof) when Spinoza writes, regarding the nature of the human mind, that "an idea is the first element constituting the human mind . . .… [but] the idea itself cannot be said to exist; it must therefore be the idea of something actually existing. But not an infinite thing [i.e., God, for there is no other infinite thing]. For an infinite thing . . .… must always necessarily exist… Therefore the first element, which constitutes the actual being of the human mind, is the idea of something actually existing. Q.E.D."

Put otherwise: my mind cannot conceive of God if God does not exist, so God must exist or I could not imagine that there is a God. The *Theologico-Political Treatise*

[17]Ibid., chap. 2, 36.
[18]Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 28.

was published in 1670—anonymously, and in Latin, rather than in the vernacular—and raised a storm of controversy. Surely what distressed some of its readers, at least, was not what it said regarding Scripture or God—it does not really question the validity of either—but the fact that it does undercut the supersessionist sensibilities of Christians and the superior sensibilities of Jews vis-à-visa-vis each other (and vis-à-vis all others). Blinded by the offense taken at Spinoza's universalism, his critics railed against him as a heretic or worse.

Two: God's existence is in any case not his main preoccupation, however—as it rarely is within the rabbinic tradition in which he was trained. That tradition seems to take the existence of God, defined as an all-everything reality, for granted, without feeling the need to prove it, even as an exercise. The rabbis are far less occupied with theology than with the implications and applications of such a God's relationship with humans for our ways of being in the world. Spinoza turns from that tradition (and from the Christian tradition as well) in his unequivocal non-sectarian viewpoint and in his introduction of novel terminology to refer to God.

Reason and Mysticism

Three: On the other hand, his entire discussion of God and our relationship to God draws not simply from a philosophical vocabulary of pure reason, with which Descartes is understood to engage in new ways, but also from its apparent opposite, that most intense branch of religion: mysticism. He writes, for example, in Part IV, Prop. XXVIII that "the mind's highest good is the knowledge of God and the mind's highest virtue is to know God," explaining in his accompanying proof that "the mind is not capable of understanding anything higher than God, that is, than a Being absolutely infinite [referencing his own definition 6 in Part I—"Concerning God"—of the *Ethics*]. . . . The mind's highest utility or good is the knowledge of God." This sort of statement reflects the very sensibility of the mystic who seeks that knowledge and believes it achievable without sacerdotal intermediation.

This is further clarified when Spinoza specifies that this sort of knowledge—he calls it *conatus*—is of a particular sort. It is beyond everyday knowledge of everyday things—the first sort of such knowledge is called opinion or imagination, and the second sort is called reason (Part II, Prop. XL, Note 2)—and is called by him intuition, "a third kind of knowledge . . . [that] proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (ibid.). From this third kind of knowledge "arises the intellectual love of God . . . [from which] arises pleasure accompanied by the idea of God as cause" (Part V, Prop. XXII, Corollary).

"The intellectual love of God . . . is eternal" (part 5, prop. 33 and Proof), he continues. That sort of love, like the knowledge with which it is synonymous, is both accessible to anybody and hidden from easy access. Such hidden, esoteric knowledge—knowledge of the *mysterion* (the hiddenness of God)[19]—is what the mystic seeks and believes he can attain, against all reasonable and logical odds. Such knowledge is a subsidence *into* the *mysterion*. It is what, for example, the early 13th-century Sufi Ibn 'Arabi

[19]From the Greek verb, *mystein*, meaning to close and by extension, to hide.

(1165-1240) asserts when he observes that "he who knows himself understands that his existence is not his own existence, but his existence is the Existence of God."[20] That individual becomes the Complete, Perfect Man (*al-Insan al-kamil*).[21]

Again and again, the mystical process of seeking that knowledge is associated with a transcendental love, which is precisely where Spinoza takes the discussion: "He who loves God cannot endeavor that God should love him in return" (part 5, prop. 19), for to do so, "he would desire that God, whom he loves, should not be God" (Proof), yet "this love towards God is the highest good which we can seek for under the guidance of reason" (Part IV, Prop. XX, Proof). Reason is still embraced, even as it is transcended. And further, it turns out, since "God loves Himself with an infinite intellectual love" (Part V, Prop. XXXV) and "the intellectual love of the mind towards God is that very love of God whereby God loves Himself" (Prop. XXXVI), "it follows that God, in so far as he loves Himself, loves man, and consequently, that the love of God towards men, and the intellectual love of the minds towards God are identical" (Corollary).

The mystic, subsumed into and swallowed up by love for God, does not expect God's love back—that would be too *egocentric*, and the mystic must be *emptied* of ego to be filled with God—but at the same time that s/he seeks God, s/he believes that God is seeking him/her, so God, paradoxically, does love the mystic as the mystic loves God. The successful mystic can no longer distinguish him/herself from God and God from her/himself: lover, love, and beloved become three elements that can no longer be distinguished from one another. This notion is conveyed in *Kabbalah* by the term *Shekhinah*—the "presence" or "indwelling" of God, conceived as a loving, paradoxically (because God is beyond gender) female aspect of God, with which the mystic (in the kabbalistic tradition: a male above the age of thirty-six or forty) merges. It is expressed in Sufism by a range of thinkers, from Rabi'a to Rumi, whose imagery is filled with the vocabulary of love.[22] It extends in Christian mysticism to the passionate imagery of women mystics, from Hildegard of Bingen to—most famously—Teresa of Avila, whose articulation of the ecstatic sense of loving mergence with God is in part facilitated by the idea that God assumes human form on one unique historical occasion as a male, so that she can, as a female, merge spiritually with Him.

It is against the background of this very mystical turn of discussion that Spinoza's universalism may be understood. To be clear: there is no specific evidence to suggest that Spinoza had studied Kabbalah, per se—whereas, on the contrary, he had studied medieval thinkers like Maimonides, apparently—but I am suggesting that his instincts mirror those of a mystic, whether or not he was actually aware of mysticism as a mode of thinking similar to his own. His philosophy of universal *embrace* (and not merely *tolerance*)—is based on his conviction that God equally embraces us all, that prophecy is not found only in one group or that God choses one group over another to love. As

[20]Ibn Al'Arabi, *The Treatise on Being (Risale t-ul-Wujudiyyah)*, trl. T. H. Wier.

[21]Given that Muhammad, Seal of the Prophets, is the one understood to be *al-Insan al-kamil*, then we understand the implications of Ibn 'Arabi's comment: every mystic has the potential to become like a prophet—an intermediary through whom God communicates to humanity. This is, of course, consistent with what every mystical tradition asserts as its aspiration: for the practitioner to become a sacerdotal conduit analogous to the prophets.

[22]See Coleman Barks and John Moyne, transl., *The Essential Rumi*, especially 88, 106, 122, 165-8.

each prophet envisions God differently, because God impresses Itself upon each in accordance with that individual's particular capacities,[23] so God relates to all peoples with equal fervor, however different the particular words of divine revelation may be from one people and its texts to the next. And the mystic, emptied of ego in order to be filled with God, recognizes (most often) that a particularist/supersessionist perspective on God—that I and my group alone possesses the truth about God—is the ego speaking.[24]

Conclusions

The biographical framework for Spinoza includes being part of a—specifically Sephardic Jewish—community the leadership of which attacked his thinking in part because of their experience and fear of the Dominican-articulated Catholic Inquisition as it had gone awry in the Spain and Portugal from which most of them had come within the previous generation or more. Both Descartes and Spinoza were surrounded, during their lifetimes, by the most intense phase of the Age of Religious Wars—the Thirty Years' War (1618-48)—but Spinoza must surely have heard of and ruminated about the massive massacres of his fellow Jews that began virtually at the end of that period, to the east, as the Chmelnitski-led (Orthodox) Ukrainians fought for their independence from (Catholic) Poland—which era of massacres continued until 1666. His need to extract humanity from its violence-inducing possessive attitude toward God would have been profound.

Both Spinoza, the Jew, and Descartes, the Catholic, sought to remain committed to their respective traditions while pushing strenuously against key aspects of their fundamental norms. Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* and *Meditations* famously introduce the novel issue of radical doubt, but when he arrives at his proof of God's existence, his method follows a process shaped centuries earlier by St Anselm of Canterbury. Spinoza introduces a new vocabulary for God in his *Ethics* and his *Theologico-Political Treatise*—new enough so that his panhenotheistic perspective was confused by his contemporaries (and is by others) with both pantheism and atheism.

Descartes both leaves behind but also remains connected to Christian medieval thought where the discussion of God is concerned in a very distinct way. Spinoza—as Warren Zev Harvey points out int his "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean"—uses medieval *Jewish* thought as an instrument informing his criticism of Descartes.[25] And when he turns specifically to God and God's relationship to human beings, he turns in a new direction—that, paradoxically turns formally away from Maimonidean rationalism toward mysticism—and introduces a new vocabulary that militates against the particularism of which Maimonides, Descartes, and everybody else connected to this narrative were part.

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[23]Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. 2, 30-42.

[24]For more details on mysticism in the Abrahamic traditions, See Ori Z Soltes, *Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Searching for Oneness*, Introduction.

[25]Warren Zev Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (2): 151-72 (1981). Harvey has written a good deal more about the relationship between Spinoza's thought and the thought of Maimonides, as, for example, in "Spinoza and Maimonides and Spinoza on True Religion," in Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *A Companion to Spinoza*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 41–46.

Descartes' *cogito* opens a door into modern *theologico-philosophy.* Spinoza's *natura* opens a door into modern *theologico-philosophico-sociology* and the question of God's interface with humanity.[26] The questions of God and humanity to which they point us are profoundly relevant, whether in the Age of Religious Wars in which they both lived, or the era of Genocidal violence—as heirs to the Holocaust and other twentieth-century genocides, from Armenia to Rwanda, together with the unanswerable question of theodicy addressed by a plethora of theologians, philosophers, and visual artists—in which we live today.

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[26]More specifics regarding how in particular the 1670 *Theological-Political Treatise*, which so scandalized so many contemporary readers, opened the passage toward liberal, democratic, and also secular thinking is presented eloquently, against the backdrop of the Dutch Golden Age by Steven Nadler in his 2013 volume, *A Book Forged in Hell*.

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