

Amor Intellectualis Dei in Meister Eckhart, Marsilio Ficino, and Baruch Spinoza: a Question of Emphasis

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical terms are subject to a variety of interpretations depending on, and / or determining the entire context in which they occur. *Amor intellectualis dei*, a composite notion from philosophical theology, assumes different aspects according to the emphasis laid on one or the other of its three elements. This can be shown by highlighting the different approaches of three thinkers, in whose philosophy the intellectual love towards god plays a central role: Meister Eckhart, Marsilio Ficino, and Benedict Spinoza.

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— Emphasis is the oral device for expressing importance, or insistence, or preference – indeed, in most cases some synthesis of the three. It highlights a certain element in a given context, and its exact meaning and value are easily conveyed and understood in the spoken word, but with far more difficulty in writing. This paper aims at developing ideas that were first formulated in a talk, and emphasis is its main topic. Hence, I will have to inform the reader, first of all, what not to expect here.

This is neither an attempt at identifying the precise place and role of the notion of *intellectual love of God* in the entire philosophical work of the three authors, Meister Eckhart, Marsilio Ficino, and Baruch Spinoza. Nor is it an enquiry or (even less) a judgement concerning

the logical possibility or impossibility of such a concept or notion as such. These questions have been raised and studied extensively (particularly in Spinoza) and could not be adequately addressed in one short paper.¹

Criticism in the polemical sense and agreement or disagreement with certain views (the notorious question whether this is *true philosophy*) would also be beside the point. Here the existence of the term *amor intellectualis Dei* and its meaningfulness for all three authors is taken for granted, and also its central role for a certain type of philosophy: Platonism specifically, and generally any

¹ Lülmann (1884) excludes the concept of *amor intellectualis* in principle, but otherwise gives a summary of Spinoza's philosophy that is still worth reading.

philosophical theology that borders on mysticism. The three philosophers were chosen as representatives of divergent tendencies or possible choices inside this brand of philosophy. By comparing the specific understanding of the intellectual love of God in each of them, I suggest that remarkable differences in their philosophical choices (e.g., carefully avoiding or consciously embracing pantheism, or egalitarian versus elitist tendencies in anthropology and ethics) can be traced back to, or at least represented, as a difference of emphasis applied to a crucial concept or doctrine. To illustrate this point by an example that is already part of our topic: if we agree that the aim of mysticism is to find oneself by losing oneself in God, it still matters whether the emphasis is laid on the finding or on the losing.

The formula *amor intellectualis Dei* promises ideal conditions for an exploration of emphasis in philosophy, since it is a composite of three elements, while denoting a single concept that cannot be expressed more briefly. It stands for the spiritual movement of the human soul towards its absolute origin. It is also, in Latin, a remarkably felicitous expression which, in translations, ought to be imitated, not narrowed down in its connotations. Before examining the shifts of meaning produced by an emphasis laid on each of its three elements, let us take a pedantic look at the grammatical and semantic structure of this formula.

Amor, or *love*, the noun, denotes a positive drive of living beings towards some goal, which affects both body and mind and is well known to include a vast

diversity of possible manifestations; hence it often requires a qualifier.

Intellectualis, *intellectual*, the qualifying adjective, introduces a certain tension into the notion, since it relates love to the intellect, while a different faculty of the soul, the will, is traditionally held to be the source or seat of love.

Dei, of *God*, the genitive object, expresses a relation of ownership, whence secondary meanings such as those of efficient and final causation can be derived; both are relevant for the present case: God is here mainly understood to be the final cause or goal of the human soul's love, but since the mystical ascent is described in dialectical terms, it leads up to a turn, where human love towards God becomes (or, given the supratemporal character of this level, always has been and is) God's own love towards His creature.

What, then, would be the major shifts in the meaning of the entire concept effected by an emphasis laid on either of the three components?

With the main emphasis on the noun *amor*, we may expect to learn how the human soul, in a strong effort of its emotional power that sweeps along the rational faculties, rises towards the One, the Good, or God. Marsilio Ficino, the chief propagator and translator of Platonic philosophy in the Renaissance, will represent this trend here.

With the emphasis on the qualifier *intellectualis* we see how a love governed by reason (i.e., modified by the rational faculty and purified of its affective characteristics) can be, or rather necessarily is, directed towards the absolute Good

(God). Spinoza is the obvious advocate for this choice.

With the emphasis on *Dei* we are incited to look towards God as the object, direction, and end of a love that involves all spiritual powers and faculties united under the lead of reason, a love which is the center, sense, and fulfillment of human existence. This is the one and only message of the late medieval Dominican philosopher and mystic Meister Eckhart.

— AMOR INTELLECTUALIS DEI: MEISTER ECKHART'S ITINERARY OF THE SOUL'S QUEST FOR THE GOD BEYOND AND WITHIN.

God, the all-embracing and innermost absolute goodness and truth, omnipresent and unattainable in the world, light of the mind and mysterious darkness, the self's soul of the soul and the eternal other, Alpha and Omega: all powers and the entire being of the mystic, the community of the saints, the angelic minds, and the entire temporal creation must first be employed and then left behind to achieve the union with the nameless divinity beyond all manifestations – which is, at the same time, the very being and the true identity of the human soul. Meister Eckhart is a mystic, and thus he is both a philosopher and a theologian with a twist. For him, it is not only the task of philosophy to lead up to the point beyond all philosophy, and that of theology to lead beyond all theology. Over and above all that, his radical religious ascetism and insatiable aspiration demand the self-sacrifice of the united driving forces of this very

love: the infinite human will and the unstoppable drive of human reason must be cast aside at the threshold of their one and only goal. They vanish in this mystical and dialectical union with the absolute (or rather, since it is timeless, in this unity) that is both intellectual and supra-intellectual, as it takes place in the mind, but cannot become an object of the mind.

But before the ultimate veil is shed, and also after the timeless moment of bliss conceded to an embodied soul is past, only the best philosophical and theological insights and the highest concentration of the soul's capacities will suffice. In describing the intellect's ascent in search for God, Eckhart calls both Christian and pagan witnesses, indiscriminately, not only in his Latin work, but also in his German *Sermons*, which were addressed to a less educated audience. Here he even refers to Plato as “der grosse Pfaffe” (that great priest).² The call to be united with God reaches out to all humankind universally and its fulfillment lies beyond all differences of temporal concern, such as confession, dogma, sacraments, social status, gender, knowledge, and the worthiness or unworthiness of a person's previous life, and hence all merits and shortcomings vanish in their due nothingness where only love prevails:

2 “[...] Plato the great Priest, speaking to us of great things. He speaks of a purity that is not in the world.” (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 3, *Ego elegi vos de mundo*) There are several English translations of Eckhart available; I chose those that best expressed the original meaning.

Therefore you should not confine yourself in just one manner of devotion, since God is to be found in no particular way, neither this one or that. That is why they do him wrong who take God just in one particular way. They take the way rather than God. (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 19, *In hoc apparuit caritas dei in nobis*)

All the perceivable world is but the entrance hall to the inner temple. God is One, oneness, being itself, beyond all created, derived, and numerable being that can, in its simplicity, only be contained by a corresponding fundamental oneness in the human mind, which Meister Eckhart calls uncreated and uncreatable:

I have occasionally spoken about a light in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable [...], which apprehends God without medium, without concealment and nakedly, just as he is in himself. (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 7, *A master says: All things that are alike love each other*)³

In man there is an agent, which is so high and noble that it receives God in his own naked being or essence, and not in his garment, as he is compassion or truth, but receives him in his own marrow, to the extent that he is exposed. (Meister Eckhart 1941, 284)

3 This sermon is untitled, so it is quoted in the introductory words.

Yet, this position, common to mystics of all denominations, does not automatically imply any indifferent syncretism, agnosticism, or least common denominator in terms of creed. For the ascent and, even more importantly, for the descent, the goal is all-important, but the point of departure and return also matters greatly. In this sense, Meister Eckhart is not only a thoroughly Christian mystic, but also a genuine Dominican philosopher, despite the scarce impact of Aristotle on his philosophy. In the controversy with the Franciscans about the faculties of the soul he opts for the priority of reason above will. When quoting five characteristics of the human intellect that make it similar to God, he makes this comparison:

God is a being who always dwells in the innermost place. That is why the intellect always seeks within. The will, on the other hand, is directed outside, to what it loves. [...] It [intellect] takes the divine at its point of origin, where goodness and truth begin, before the divine acquires a name [...] But its sister, the will, is content with God insofar as he is good, while the intellect strips all this away [...] (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 23, *Modicum et iam non videbitis me*)

A Christian mystic Eckhart definitely is, despite his drive to rise to the Godhead above the level of distinction between the persons of the Trinity. For as long as words, names, and images are needed to understand and communicate the (however unutterable) experience,

these images, terms, and means are Christian and trinitarian up to the highest degree and down to the deepest mystery. For representing the soul's union with its absolute origin and its genuine eternal identity, the narration of Eckhart's choice, to which he returns so insistently that it is more than just an image, is the perpetual birth of the Divine Son in the human soul:

Here in time we make holiday because the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St Augustine says this birth is always happening. But if it happens not in me, what does it profit me? [...] We intend therefore to speak of this birth as taking place in us: as being consummated in the virtuous soul; for it is in the perfect soul that God speaks his Word. [...] It is bound to be the purest, loftiest, subtlest part of the soul. [...] The soul in which this birth shall come to pass must be absolutely pure and must live in gentle fashion, quite peaceful and wholly introverted: not running out through the five senses into the manifold of creatures, but altogether within and harmonized in her summit. (Meister Eckhart 1957, Sermon I, *Dum medium silentium tenerunt omnia*, 3)

Here the need and yearning of humankind for God turns into a reciprocal, almost symmetric relation:

Without this above-mentioned agent God acts not at all. Whatever God

gives, he gives through it, and if God should give us himself without that agent, we would not accept him, nor would he be to our taste. (Meister Eckhart 1941, 284)

As the source and substance of all being, indeed as being itself, is God then transcendent or immanent in his creation? Meister Eckhart has been accused of pantheism, yet he insists on transcendence. For all his overflowing generosity, there is something the Creator claims as exclusively his own, inaccessible even to angelic minds. It is the absolute perfection of eternal unity and universality. While it is true that simply by being all creatures hold in their core a divine spark, an emanation from the eternal light, in their particularity they do not know it and cannot touch it:

[...] our salvation depends upon our knowing and recognizing the Chief Good which is God Himself. I have a capacity in my soul for taking in God Himself. I have a capacity in my soul for taking in God entirely. [...] God is nearer to me than I am to myself: my existence depends on the nearness and presence of God. He is also near things of wood and stone, but they know it not. [...] For this reason man is happier than the inanimate wood, because he knows and understands how God is near him. [...] His happiness does not arise from this that God is near him, and in him, and that he possesses God, but from this that he *knows* the nearness of God,

and loves Him [...]” (Meister Eckhart 1909, Sermon I, The Nearness of the Kingdom, 6)

Creation is not a historic event, but a perpetual act beyond time, so we might speak, at the utmost, of a panentheistic tendency here, with the entire world of mortal and immortal beings held within the dynamics of the divine life. For a Platonist this tendency is remarkably weak: with St. Augustine Eckhart holds that every creature speaks about God, saying: “I am not He”.

Besides, Creator, God the Father, and Supreme Bounty are still names and relations, while the mystic searches for the divine essence beyond all names. Only the human soul, exalted even over the highest hierarchy of angels, is aware of that deepest and darkest abyss in itself, where, by concentrating all its forces, it finds God and itself:

The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye are one eye, and one vision or seeing, and one knowing and loving. (Meister Eckhart 1941, 288)

One loving, this can be seen as the central message and final result of the entire journey. What it means regarding God is that he is infinitely loving; otherwise there would not have been any creation. His relation to the world can be expressed as “God loves himself through the world”. His specific relation to humankind is a strong desire to be God in their souls:

No man desires anything so eagerly, as God desires to bring men to the knowledge of Himself. God is always ready, but we are very unready. God is near us, but we are far from Him. God is within, and we are without. (Meister Eckhart 1909, Sermon II, The Nearness of the Kingdom, 7)

[...] He yearns after us and in the depth of His Divine Being waves of longing break forth to reveal to us the abyss of His Godhead and the fullness of His essence; He hastens to identify Himself with us. [...] God loveth man not less than He loveth Himself. (Meister Eckhart 1909, Sermon IV, True Hearing, 9–10)

For mortal man returning under the conditions of time “one loving” means no less than the transfiguration of affective human love into the divine breath of the Holy Spirit:

[...] in that love in which God loves himself, in that same love he loves me, and the soul loves God in the same love in which he loves himself, and if this love did not exist, in which God loves the soul, then neither would the Holy Spirit exist. The soul loves God in the warmth and the burgeoning of the Holy Spirit. (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 15, *In diebus suis placuit deo et inventus est iustus*)

Indeed, Eckhart takes the return from the summit as seriously as the ascent. It is neither the same world that

is given back by God to the person that had renounced it, nor the same person that is given back to the world. The sinner returns to his place transformed to holiness, no more as a self-seeking lonely individual, but as a member of the community of the saints. All previous sins are annihilated, since both the merit and the office of all saints, to do God's work in the world, are shared. The consciousness of the mystical unity purifies the soul of all evil intentions and selfish ambitions, enables it to truly love the next man as oneself, and, as it is in perfect accordance with the will of God, frees it from all regret whenever its good intentions do not achieve the intended result. The blessed soul that could hold on to this state would live in Paradise on Earth:

If God's will is pleasing to you, then whatever happens to you or does not happen to you, will be heaven. (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 9, Qui sequitur iustitiam, diligitur a domino)

AMOR INTELLECTUALIS DEI: MARSILIO FICINO'S PRAISE OF PLATONIC LOVE AND LOVE OF PLATONISM

While both are members of the Platonic brotherhood, Meister Eckhart and Marsilio Ficino are not exactly brethren in Christ. For Eckhart, the son can be born in every human soul, however pagan it might be at the outset. Yet it will be still the Word, the second person of the Trinity, the Christ, who is born, so that one could say that all pagans

who achieve the mystical union become members of Christ's body (as the union occurs beyond time, historical succession does not matter). In Ficino's piety, on the contrary, Christ figures scarcely, or not at all. When insisting that Platonism is by far the better philosophy for Christians than Aristotelianism, Ficino seems to take it for granted that a good Platonist will be automatically a good Christian, as well. If Meister Eckhart might be said to Christianize pagan Antiquity, Ficino in his quest for *theologia perennis* proceeded to paganize Christianity.

For Ficino, the emphasis is on love, Platonic love, precisely as it was depicted by Diotima in the *Symposium*. This highly dialectical affect, a physical attraction that presently converts into spiritual friendship and turns the opposites into equals, does not strike us as the birthright of all humankind, defective poor sinners though they all be. It rather appears as the privilege of an intellectual elite, an exclusive club of excellent men (no women invited), who seem to be ennobled not so much by the success of, than by the access to, the spiritual journey.

Of course, Ficino may have been subjectively sincere in his claims of serving the reigning religion, and if not, to pay lip service was his only safe option. As to elitism, Ficino could hardly fail to feel exceptional as the chief interpreter (in all senses of the word) of Platonic philosophy for the Latin-speaking scientific world. Destined from boyhood to translate Plato's and his followers' works from the Greek originals, he

imbibed directly from the sources what had previously been merely accessible through the mediation of the Church Fathers and the Arabs, who had skillfully amalgamated Platonic and Aristotelian elements in their own philosophical systems. No wonder that Ficino became totally absorbed in this rich new world of ideas. Never wavering in his total dedication as a translator and what we could call a literary agent and manager for his authors, he was extolled by some of his contemporaries, and criticized by others for being, or believing himself to be, a second Plato. While scholars were, and still are, deeply indebted to him for his life's work of recovering and reconstructing Platonism as systematic philosophy in its own right, his attempts to resurrect the entire atmosphere of the Platonic conversations in his own days (with himself as the high priest of the eternal true philosophy) smack of a certain eccentricity today. In Renaissance Italy it was just a good strategy for the promotion of new ideas.

Interestingly, Meister Eckhart and Ficino draw opposite conclusions from a position they both share, namely, an exceptional nature and function of humans in the entire cosmos and their intimate relation to God. This could evidently be claimed to support both an egalitarian and an elitist ethics.

In his cosmology Ficino strictly adheres to the Neo-Platonic chain of beings, the hierarchical order of emanations, with the manifold things in the universe created by the First Cause, the One, indirectly, via a series of spiritual movers of lesser degree. In the Ptolemaic

cosmos of heavenly spheres, the terrestrial things have the lowest status and receive the least and most remote influence from the divine source.⁴ But while the human body also obeys the general cosmic order, the human soul has the high privilege of being God's immediate creation. In a letter to his friend Giovanni Cavalcanti, Ficino writes:

Just as God, who is the Creator of our souls, also regulates them, so is the universe both the begetter and controller of our bodies. Since the soul is the son of God and the body is a limb of the universe, our souls are moved gently and easily by God, as though by a father, through the laws of providence; but our bodies are dragged by the universal body through the forces of fate, as a single particle is dragged by the total mass of which it is a part, under some violent movement. Yet the force of fate does not penetrate the mind unless the mind of its own accord has first become submerged in the body, which is subject to fate. (Ficino 2018, 64)

The purely natural destiny of the human soul is to vivify and move a human

4 Meister Eckhart rejects the theory of indirect creation, as it contradicts the book of Genesis and, even worse, would set a limit to divine power and goodness: "... that certain creatures are so close to God and bear the imprint of so much divine light within themselves that they bestow being on other creatures too. This is not true, for being is so exalted and so pure and so akin to God that no one can bestow being but God alone in himself." (Meister Eckhart 2013, Sermon 14, *In occisione gladii mortui sunt*)

body, thereby expanding the divine influence down to the lowest ontological level of particular beings. Thence it has a natural inclination to turn away from its first source. But as the connection with God still endures, the soul is also capable of discovering the divine beauty and harmony that permeate the whole world in all things, especially in other human bodies and souls. Thus it is given a genuine choice either to remain totally involved in the lower world, or to turn back, remembering its origin, and to rise through the love of creatures to the true goal of its love, the ineffable First and One. Exclusive love towards created finite things is a fallacy, as it will never satisfy the soul. For all creation is changeable and mortal, and no being ever attains satisfaction, unless it succeeds in reaching its proper cause:

That you might understand that only when each thing reaches its proximate cause does it come to a complete rest and not seek further. And so the mind, which comes to rest in no one thing, unless it is the first, has no cause of its own except the first. A proof of this is that man's mind is turned towards God without an intermediary. For things are converted towards their cause in the same way as they proceed from it. (Ficino 2003, 183–185)

We observe a tension, or rather an inner rift, that divides the human being into the opposite intentions of body and soul, but there is also a similar diverging tendency in the disposition of divine

causation. The transcendent First Cause or the One and the all-permeating immanent agent, the universal soul, are not different aspects of the same God, they are separate divine beings, the lower of which, the soul of the universe, being an emanation from the transcendent One. Yet, seen from the perspective of the universe, both are God, one turning towards it, the other away from it. Ficino's insistence on the perfect harmony between the highest and the lowest levels in the hierarchy, which makes everything appear excellent and divine by its mere existence, tends to blur the difference between the transcendent and the immanent. It seems appropriate to regard Ficino's philosophical theology as panentheistic, since all beings are enveloped in the divine essence, while it remains an open question, whether he effectively avoided, or even intended to avoid pantheism.

If we can say that, for Meister Eckhart, God loves himself through the world, for Ficino it is the human soul that loves God through the world:

Our mind relates to God in the same way, as the glance of our eyes to the sun. For the eye does not just long for the light before all other things, but only for the light. If we delight in bodies, in souls, in angels, it is not in these, really, but we will have loved God in them. In the bodies the shadow of God, in the souls the likeness of God, in the angels his image. Hence let us in the present time love God in all things, so that finally we may love all things in God. For living

thus, we will come to see God, and in God everything, and will love him, and everything that is in him.⁵

Here we find no corresponding desire of God for the human soul, no transformation of human love into the Holy Spirit. Instead the turn occurs in a different way, as man achieves his perfection through a conjunction with his ideal form:

And whoever had dedicated himself for love to God in this temporal state, will finally recuperate himself in God. For he will return to his idea, through which he has been created. Here he will be reformed again, if he were lacking in something; he will forever be attached to his idea. For the true man and the idea of man is one and the same. Hence, whoever of us on earth is separated from God is not a true man, since he is cut off from his idea and form. Divine love and piety lead us up to it. If here we are divided and mutilated, then, joined in love to our idea, we will emerge as integer men, and if we first appeared to render homage to God in

the things, for then to render homage to the things in God, and to such extent we will venerate the things in God that we embrace ourselves in him above all other things; and in loving God we appear to have loved ourselves.⁶

Like Meister Eckhart, Ficino maintains that all faculties of the soul, including the senses, must be employed in the loving ascent to God. But he lays the emphasis on love, giving the lead to the will with its infinite capacity rather than to limited human reason. After stating that God is immense light, Ficino draws the following conclusion:

God's light surpasses the surface of the intellect as highly as God's heat deeply penetrates the center of the will. Since the heat draws its origin from the light, there is also an immense glow, the infinitely beneficial glow in the infinite good. Therefore we rather reach the glow through the glow of our will than through

5 "Ita enim mens ad deum ut ad solem acies oculorum. Oculi autem non modo lumen pre ceteris sed et solum appetit lumen. Si corpora, si animos, si angelos diligimus, non ista quidem sed deum in istis amabimus. In corporibus quidem dei umbram; in animis dei similitudinem; in angelis, eiusdem imaginem. Ita deum ad presens in omnibus diligemus ut in deo tandem omnia diligamus. Nam ita viventes eo proficemur ut et deum et in deo omnia videamus amemusque et ipsum et que in ipso sunt omnia." (Ficino 2002, 203) – Unless cited otherwise, translations are mine.

6 "Et quisquis hoc in tempore sese deo caritate devoverit, se denique recuperabit in deo. Nempe ad suam, per quam creatus est, redibit ideam. Ibi rursus, si quid ipsi defuerit, reformabitur; idee sue perpetuo coherebit. Verus autem homo et idea hominis idem. Ideo quisque nostrum in terris a deo separatus, non verus est homo, cum a sui idea sit formaque disiunctus. Ad eam nos divinus amor pietasque perducet. Cumque hic discerpti sumus et mutilati, idee tunc nostre amando coniuncti, integri homines evademus, ut deum primo in rebus coulissee videamur, quo res deinde in deo colamus, resque in deo ideo venerari, ut nos ipsos in eo pre centeris amplectamur: et amando deum, nos ipsos videamur amasse." (Ficino 2002, 203–205)

the spark of our mind. For as much as God excels us by the light of his intellect, as much, indeed, he burns himself into us by the glow of his goodness, so that just as nothing could be higher than God, likewise nothing could be deeper. The greater his light, the more it is naturally unknown to the intellect. The more vehement the glow, the more, so to say, certain it is to the will. Thence God is, in a way, for the highest cognition of the intellect like the night of the intellect. For the highest love of the will he certainly is the day of the will.⁷

Thus, under the guidance of the will, the senses cooperate. Whenever the beauty of a human body does not distract the lover to base sensuality (to gratification of the lower senses of taste and touch), it may lead him through the admiration of the harmony of beautiful souls to the insight that the true object of his love is the divine spark in the beloved one, that ray of divine light spread

throughout the entire cosmos, which is truth itself. However, for Ficino the lover is not supposed to turn away from the beloved person once the real aim of his love is understood. Rather, united in friendship, both will search for truth in Socratic dialogue and will thus, together, strive for the attainment of that highest goal of their love, the One and infinite God:

My dear Giovanni, the Platonic philosophers defined true friendship as the permanent union of the lives of two men. But I think that life is one only for those men who work towards one end, as it were treading the same path towards a common goal. I believe their fellowship will only be permanent when the aim which they have set themselves as a common duty is not only single, but also permanent and sure. [...] And so friendship, as it endeavors through the single aim of two men to cultivate the soul through virtue, is clearly nothing but the supreme harmony of two souls in the cultivation of God. And as God loves those who cultivate Him with devoted minds, there cannot be the two friends on their own, but there must always be three, the two men and God [...] (Ficino 2018, 65–66)

The God who agrees to such a threesome is certainly not the jealous Jehovah of the Old Testament. Or, to make the point more seriously, we may wonder which union is more prominent here, that with the distant divinity or that

7 „Quantum lux Dei supereminet superficiem intellectus, tantum dei calor centrum penetrat voluntatis. Cum vero a lumine calor trahit originem, est etiam ardor immensus, ardor in bono infinito infinite beneficus. Hunc nos ardorem voluntatis ardore potiusquam scintilla mentis attingimus, nam Deus quantum intellectus sui lucie nos supereminet, tantum ferme bonitatis ardore se nobis inurit, ut nihil Deo excelsius sit, nihil quoque profundius. Quo amplior eius lux eo intellectui naturaliter est ignotior. Quo vehementior ardor eo, ut dicam, certior voluntati. Deus ergo in summa intellectus cognitione quodammodo nox quaedam est intellectui. In summo voluntatis amore certe dies est voluntati.” (Ficino 1993, 68)

with the close human companion. Love for the next man (the chosen, not the random next) appears not as a result of the ascent, but as its condition. However, if good company makes the journey enjoyable, Platonic lovers are still held to keep to a certain decorum:

[...] love has as many forms as there are lovers. In truth all men love, men, I say, Giovanni, for he who loves no one is not a man. So not only in the book which I have written on love but also in my letters I have pointed out for those who love the mark to which they should advance. Since the man who oversteps this mark is his own real enemy, he can be no true friend to others. (Ficino 2018, 61)

We may quip that of all the superfluous ballast Ficino throws away in his ascent, the first parcel is excessive ascetism, or wonder if the charioteer of the soul had managed to keep a firm grip on the reins when he gave precedence to the will. But at a sober look it seems obvious that in Ficino's quest for the divine origin we witness an empowerment of the human agent, who transforms himself in the ascent, rather than being transformed by divine grace on reaching his goal. And once the goal is reached, the utmost joy for the soul is not losing itself in God, but finding itself there:

But if from more and more agreeable things gradually a greater and greater enjoyment arises, and if nothing is more agreeable to humans than the idea of humanity itself,

which is the true human, what then is sweeter than both, to conceive it by understanding in oneself, and to return oneself to it by loving? [...] For there our idea pleases us, for everybody is dearest to himself. There only we enjoy ourselves the utmost, where we most truly find ourselves. In our idea all ideas please us. The beauty in all delights us, all fulfill us in goodness.⁸

And what has Ficino to say about the descent, about the soul's return into the cave of the material temporal world? Not much about any challenging task or a responsibility. The *Argumentum in Platoniam theologiam* is divided into three parts, the first dealing with the ascent of the soul to God, the second with the contemplation of God, and the third, as we might assume, and as the brief introductory passage announces, with the descent. But in the text the actual title of the third part is, in correspondence to its actual content: "Why the soul in the body has difficulties to cognize the divine, and that it is immortal".⁹

8 "Ac si ex rebus magis magisque convenientibus maior gradatim maiorque nascitur delectatio, atque si nihil convenientius homini quam ipsa humanitatis idea, quae verus est homo, quid suavius quam et eam intellegendo in se complecti et in eam amando restitui? [...] Ibi ergo placet idea nostra, est enim sibi quisque carissimus. Ibi solum plenissime delectamur ubi solum verissime nos reperimus. In nostra idea placent omnes. Pulchritudo oblectat in omnibus, omnes in bonitate nos implent." (Ficino 1993, 80–82)

9 "Cum anima in corpore difficile Divina cognoscat et quod sit immortalis." (Ficino 1993, 84)

The mission is accomplished with the ascent, and from the summit, having gained perfection in the idea of man, the soul may look back without anger on the difficulties left behind.

— AMOR INTELLECTUALIS DEI: SPINOZA'S UNREQUITED LOVE FOR THE ABSOLUTELY INDIFFERENT IMPERSONAL GOD

Last, but not least, Spinoza, the best known among our three authors, emphasized the qualifier. For him, the love of God is the natural and necessary act of an Intellect that wants to purify itself from all passions and get all its affections fully under control. This reminds us of Stoicism, and Spinoza's love towards God actually has much in common with the *amor fati*: it is not a spontaneous or natural drive; it is an insight, not a feeling; it has no expectations of reciprocity, being entirely its own reward.

As a relative to the Platonic family, Spinoza would not be a brother, but a distant cousin. The sources that fed his philosophy (which is, nonetheless, entirely his own) are far more numerous and diverse than those of the other two philosophers. To name just two of the major additional influences, there is a rich Hebrew philosophical and theological tradition (including Kabbalah) and there are his elder contemporaries, foremost, of course, Descartes, whose *Discourse on Method* gave Spinoza the impulse to construe his *Ethics* in imitation of Euclid's *Geometry*, and whose exploration of the *Passions of the Soul* inspired Spinoza's two early treatises,¹⁰ and, we might say, his entire philosophical project.

If Ficino came quite close to pantheism, with God embracing the world, whose emanations are, in turn, embraced by the world, the hierarchical structure of the chain of causation still drew a tenuous borderline between the cosmic and the divine. The more resolute Spinoza fully and openly endorsed pantheism and was cursed by theologians and idolized by Enlightenment deists and atheists (arguably, through a misunderstanding, which is always just a partial understanding).¹¹

Spinoza's God is the Cosmos, and his Cosmos is God. Nature is God's direct action. All things not only receive their being from God and exist within the embracing divine essence: God is the only entity that exists in the proper full sense of the word, i.e., the only substance (Spinoza 1980, Ip14). God is both mind and matter (i.e., both thought and extension are his attributes), since for Spinoza no substance can be produced by another substance (Spinoza 1980 Ip6). Everything else that can be said to exist relates to and depends on God. It is in a restrict and derivative sense, as some mode or modification of God, as one of his infinite manifestations.

All things in the world are either material or spiritual, i.e. in *our* world

10 *On the Emendation of the Intellect* and *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-being*, both written around 1661, but published posthumously.

11 "Falsehood consists in a lack of cognition, which involves inadequate, or mutilated, or confused ideas." (Spinoza 1980, IIp35) Spinoza is cited by book (Roman numerals) and propositions ("p" and number). Spinoza's *Ethica* is translated by me from Spinoza (1980).

all are manifestations of the only two divine attributes accessible to us: extension and thought. Nothing can preclude God from having innumerable further attributes attached to his substance, but since we do not participate in more than these two, we can never become aware of such attributes, so all speculations would be vain. Humans are complex beings that are composed of many parts and partake of both attributes: through their material bodies they experience extension and through their intellectual souls thought.

As mere finite manifestations of the divine attributes, human beings, both body and soul, can neither be, nor be understood, without God. This means that they can only be and be understood within God. Incidentally, a passage from Ficino's monumental *Platonic Theology* (with a stronger emphasis than in its original context) sums up quite nicely Spinoza's most important basic insight and point of departure:

But God is the act, the author of all existing things, and through the overflowing of His act He moves the mind prior to, more vehemently, and more lastingly than all the other objects presented to it. [...] So absolute being itself, that is the pure act, the effective cause of all existing things, God in other words, is the first thing that [...] presents itself to minds, [...] and fills them with light, and reveals all other things to them. Though we have within us its everlasting form and have a notion of it, and *though we know everything else through it and*

in it, yet we do not realize this (Ficino 2004, 99, my emphasis).

Or, as Spinoza himself puts it *more geometrico*:

Proposition 15. Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be known. – Proof: Besides God, no substance is given, or can be known (by prop. 14), that is (by def. 3) nothing which is in itself and is known through itself. But (by def. 5) modes can neither be, nor be known without substance. Thence they can only be in the divine nature and only be known through the same. But nothing is given besides substances and modes (by axiom 1). Therefore nothing can be, nor be known without God. Q. E. D. (Spinoza 1980, Ip15)

In a reversal of negative theology, Spinoza claims that God (however little we may know of him and his infinite attributes) is the best known of all things, namely the one of which we can attain the truest and clearest notion, whereas all other things are only known through God in a derivative, more complicated, and far less reliable way:

The cognition of the eternal and infinite essence of God, which is involved in every idea, is adequate and perfect. (Spinoza 1980, IIp46)

All ideas, insofar as they relate to God, are true. – Proof: For all ideas that are in God correspond in all with their objects and ideas [...],

hence [...] they are all true. (Spinoza 1980, IIp33)

The human mind does not cognize the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through the ideas of the affections, by which the body is affected. (Spinoza 1980, IIp19)

The human mind perceives no external body as actual existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body. (Spinoza 1980, IIp26)

The mind does not cognize itself, except by perceiving the ideas of the affections of the body. (Spinoza 1980, IIp22)

Nonetheless, as in the succession of time the first thing the mind perceives is its body, it is naturally attached to it and relates its thought to it. Indeed,

The object of the idea that constitutes the human mind is nothing else but the body, i.e., a certain mode of extension that actually exists. (Spinoza 1980, IIp13)

This implies that all humans start their intellectual journey with erroneous (incomplete), one might even say, perverse notions. The perceptions of the human mind are of three different kinds: the first, of lowest degree, consists in unclear ideas that lead to imperfect insight, illusions, or mere fallible belief; the second, rational insight or true belief (Descartes' *clara et distincta perceptio*), and the third and highest,

immediate intuition, lead to true and adequate insight. As love is the immediate effect of knowing something to be good (i.e., knowing it to add to the joy and power of living), true, stable, and perfect knowledge is what the human mind really loves (if it is in its right mind). And since true knowledge is only in God, human happiness is only achieved by relating all things not to the finite and changing body, but to the eternal source of all being.

Accordingly, the loving ascent towards God consists in freeing the mind of error and prejudices of all kinds: about external things, about itself and its relation to the body, and about the nature of God. This is also the fullest realization of the idea of man, thence the task of both the individual and all humanity (or rather a scientific community on behalf of all humanity) and the only way to the greatest possible happiness. All non-human living beings and objects are to be regarded and treated as merely instrumental to this end.

The main error about the nature of God is anthropomorphism. Spinoza is a sworn enemy of all established religions, because they keep spreading such superstitious notions as God loving (or hating) man, or having created the world for man's sake, or acting for any purpose at all (Spinoza 1980, I, Appendix). God acts with absolute necessity according to the laws given by his nature, totally unrestricted and unaffected by anything (Spinoza 1980, Ip17c1). To expect him to love any creature is absurd, because love is directed towards the source of an increased power and joy, and nothing

can add to the infinite power of the absolutely perfect being. So God cannot love anything but himself. The existing religions all promote a wrongheaded attitude towards God, namely the passive affections of hope and fear, which are most damaging for humanity.

The mind's main error (both gno-seological and moral) about itself, the world, and the relation between them is to restrict itself to a passive stance. Instead of continuing to be dominated by the body, as every human mind is naturally at the beginning of life, it must take charge, substituting passions with actions that are based on an adequate understanding of its own body and of as much of external beings as possible. As adequate self-understanding is gained only by relating all things to God, this is, at the same time, an increasing knowledge of, i.e., Love towards God (Spinoza 1980, Vp15).

"Nobody can hate God" (Spinoza 1980, Vp18). Only one's own false prejudices can be hated; whatever is truly conceived about God necessarily evokes love.

Spinoza gives us a concise summary of the entire project of self-enhancement in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*:

Let us now examine the actions of the body on the soul. We maintain that the principal one is that it causes the soul to perceive it, and thereby to perceive other bodies also. This is caused only by Motion and Rest together. For there are no other things in the body through which it could act.

So whatever else from this perception happens to the soul cannot be produced through the body. And because the first thing the soul comes to know is the body, the result is that the soul loves the body and is united to it. But since [...] the cause of love, hate, and sadness must be sought not in the body, but only in the soul (for all the actions of the body must proceed from motion and rest), and because we see clearly and distinctly that one love is destroyed by the perception of something else that is better, it follows from this clearly that if we once come to know God (at least with as clear a knowledge as we have of our body), we must then come to be united with him even more closely than with our body, and be, as it were, released from the body.

I say more closely, for we have already proven before that without him we can neither be nor be understood. This is because we know him, and must know him, not through anything else (as is the case with all other things), but only through himself. [...] Indeed, we know him better than we know ourselves, because without him we do not know ourselves at all. (Spinoza 1985, Ip93, 133)

Once the mind has realized its closeness to God, its being a modification of God's attribute of thinking, it is released in its acts from temporality, i.e., it cognizes all things, including itself, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Its hitherto cool rational attitude regains some affective value, however, without becoming a feeling:

it stays purely rational but is now more adequately termed love than before. Only now it is *amor intellectualis Dei* in the full sense, since the mind even finds itself included in the love of God for himself. What was, up to this point, the best, or rather only method for the pursuit of human happiness in this life gains a new dimension as the mind realizes that it is, has always been, and will ever be contained in the divine mind as the individual idea of that particular extension that is (will be, or was) its body. A hitherto unknown increase of power and joy changes the very language of the last part of *Ethics*, which deals with the mind's condition after this turn. A mind that is conscious of its true relation to God is no more merely human, so it can be said to be, in a way, free and immortal.¹²

CONCLUSION

Thus we see how the difference of emphasis has made a great difference. The journey has led our travelers through rather different landscapes, and even the God they encountered at the end does not look the same: Meister Eckhart's fervent, exacting lover, who demands

everything, for then to give everything; Ficino's most tolerant divinity that does not really ask for enormous sacrifices, but rewards good choices in lifestyle and lovers; Spinoza's abstract impersonal universal necessity, which is, nonetheless, the only love-worthy thing there is – they appear to have little in common. Yet their claim is identical: to be the one and only absolute and perfect first origin and last end of everything.

I am well aware that in pointing out the differences I am telling only half of the story. As all our God-seekers are turned around, when they reach the summit, we may also turn around and say: this is just a question of emphasis, a difference of linguistic expression for an insight or an experience which, in and for itself, is unutterable. It is approached in extremely different languages (theological, poetic, analytical), but these languages were formed and used for other purposes, and so they each carry their own baggage of connotations. The choice of language tells us much about the speakers. It does not tell us definitely whether or not they all have been in the same place.

12 For a detailed analysis of the apparent contradictions between the first four parts and the last one of Spinoza's *Ethics* see Nadler (2015); for our topic it is also interesting for introducing a comparison with another author, Maimonides.

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