Spinoza, the God-Intoxicated "Atheist"

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ABSTRACT*

This paper contributes to the discourse about how to characterize one of the most misunderstood and diversely interpreted religious philosophers, Baruch Spinoza. I begin by focusing on the widely different ways that Spinoza's teaching about God has been characterized, finding the root in these divergencies in the unique way that he defined words. The paper then examines the arguments for treating Spinoza first as an atheist, then as a pantheist, and lastly as a panentheist, arguing that the third of these terms is clearly the most faithful if his texts are to be taken at face value. Finally, the paper presents Spinoza as a bridge builder between secularism and religion, one whose iconoclasm is easily matched by his ability to inspire a deep religiosity.

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Heretic. Mystic. Atheist. Pantheist. Panentheist. These terms have been thrown around frequently in reference to Spinoza. Novalis famously called him a "God-intoxicated man." And Goethe named Spinoza, "the most religious, even the most Christian." Then again, he was also referred to as the author of a "book forged in hell … by the devil himself." So there you have it; the same person is the most religious and the most heretical. A hero to the religious and the anti-religious, and an equally ubiquitous villain.

This paper will focus on Spinoza's philosophy of God, which somehow has become all things to all people. First, we will examine the causes of Spinozism's chameleon-like nature. Then we will examine and endeavor to refute the charge that Spinozism is simply a thinly veiled form of atheism. Next, we will consider the more palatable descriptions of Spinozism as a form of pantheism or panentheism. And that will be followed by an examination of how Spinoza's philosophy of God became central to his metaphysics and ethics alike. Indeed, by considering the so-called "Principle of Plentitude" and Spinoza's need to posit a God worthy of Anselm's formulation of "a being than which none greater can be conceived," we will attempt to justify how a man who has been called an "atheist" by many can more aptly be viewed as prototypically religious.

I. HOW SPINOZA, AS A PHILOSOPHER OF GOD, BECAME A CHAMELEON

Anyone with even the most remote familiarity with Spinoza's philosophy of God must recognize the gaping disparities in the way it has been characterized. As we will discuss below, to some commentators his philosophy is opposed to the very existence of God, except when the term is distorted beyond recognition. To others, Spinoza has provided such a theocentric philosophy that it required him to do away with the world so as to make as much room as possible for the divine. As for those commentators who do not fall at either of those extremes, they hardly seem to form a consensus about exactly what Spinoza meant by "God" or what it means to approach this God with "intellectual love." Why such diversity? How did he become such a chameleon? And does he himself share any of the blame for the cacophony of views that have been voiced on this topic? These are the first set of issues I would like to consider.

To begin with, it is easy to discount what Spinoza wrote as something we can't simply take at face value. As a Marrano, Spinoza came from a culture in which to survive, people wore a mask to hide their Jewish character. You don't have to be a Straussian to realize that writers from such a culture would tend to be comfortable creating texts that have an esoteric meaning as well as an exoteric one. As for the man himself, simply observe the motto engraved on his seal: *caute*, meaning "with caution." Truly, if you wish to take on conventional beliefs about everything the authorities hold dear – God, miracles, immortality, ethics – writing with caution does not call for an especially straightforward presentation.

The suspicion that "when Spinoza said X, he really meant Y" is reinforced by the content of his writings – in particular, his sidesteps in confronting such sacred cows as immortality and the uniqueness of Christ. One minute, Spinoza tells us that "The Mind "can neither imagine anything, nor recollect past things, except while the Body endures," (EVp21)[1] and it endures "only insofar as it involves the actual existence of the body... ." (EVp23s) But he also wrote that "The human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but something of it remains which is eternal." (EVp23) Do you find those statements consistent? Or deliberately confusing? As for his teachings on "Christ," you might think that Spinoza, the staunch opponent of supernaturalism and religious anthropomorphism, would scoff at the mere mention of that name. Instead, Spinoza called Christ

1 When citing Spinoza, this essay will use the translation in Curley (1985; 2016). At times, I will include page references to Gebhardt (1925), hereafter abbreviated as OP, for *Opera Postuma*, including the volume, page, and line numbers (e.g., OP II/294/25-26, in the case of the first citation referenced above). When a passage is short enough for an *OP* citation to be unnecessary, I will simply cite, in the case of the *Ethics* (E), the part (I-V), proposition (p), corollary (c) definition (d), demonstration (dem), scholium (s), appendix (app), preface (pref.), lemma (L), or axiom (ax), and in the case of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) the chapter and paragraph.

"not so much a Prophet as the mouth of God. … God revealed himself immediately to Christ, *or* to his mind – and not, as he did to the Prophets through words and images." (TTP IV (31, 32))

So, Spinoza owes his chameleon-like stature in part to his cultural heritage, his personal attraction to caution, and the contents of his statements on certain hot-button issues. But perhaps the most important reason why this thinker has become all things to all people is his original use of language. Spinoza was like a potter who uses familiar tools – just not in the way other potters use them. In Part 3 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza fessed up about the way he used words: "I know that in their common usage these words mean something else. But my purpose is to explain the nature of things, not the meaning of words. I intend to indicate these things by words whose usual meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them." (E3app.XX) Spinoza spoke about God, Nature, substance, freedom, and eternity in such a way that when his statements are taken out of context, they have a very clear conventional meaning. It is just not the one he intended. Serious students of Spinoza understand that. But when it suits our purposes, it is hard to resist the tendency to avoid clarifying the special way he used words, thereby allowing our readers to assign his words their conventional meanings and form misimpressions of the author's intent.

Spinoza was nobody's fool. He obviously understood that if he used words differently than they were generally used, he was bound to be misunderstood. Notably, however, Edwin Curley suggested that when Spinoza said that he was using words whose conventional meaning "is not entirely opposed" to his intended meaning, he meant that he was using the words whose meaning "comes nearest to" what he intended (Curley 1985, 536, n. 50). Moreover, Spinoza set forth numerous definitions when beginning each of the first four parts of the *Ethics*, suggesting that he was trying to ensure that careful readers appreciated his unique use of terms. So maybe Spinoza did not relish being misunderstood and strove to avoid it, while recognizing that some amount of misunderstanding was inevitable, particularly for his less careful readers who were not initiated into his unique vocabulary. What we can say with confidence is that by writing his magnum opus (the *Ethics*) in an often-concise, geometrical style, Spinoza chose not to fully flesh out all his points, leaving it to his readers to translate the words they read from Spinozese and fill in various gaps when the author's explanations and clarifications were less than comprehensive.

Once all this is considered together, we can see how Spinoza can stop being the potter and start becoming the clay. In other words, we can easily enough mold his thoughts to fit *our* preferences and biases rather than his own. Whether or not he deliberately invited being misunderstood, this is precisely what has happened – in his day, and I dare say, in ours as well.

Our central focus in this paper is on Spinoza's philosophy of God. We have

shown we can twist it in many directions simply by assuming either that he did not always mean what he said or by taking his words out of context and ignoring the idiosyncratic meanings he assigned to them. My attempt, however, will be to resist those temptations. Rather, I will strive to take his writings on their own terms, respect his unique use of common words, and locate the center of gravity that motivated his writing. In doing so, I find myself more in agreement with Goethe and Novalis than with those who see Spinoza first and foremost as a deicide.

II. SPINOZISM AND ATHEISM

Near the beginning of the *Ethics,* Spinoza defined the word "God" as follows: "By God, I mean an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence." [EId6] Spinoza had previously defined "substance" as meaning "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself" (E1d3) and defined "cause of itself" as meaning "that whose essence involves existence, *or* that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing." (EId1) When those definitions are put together, it is clear that Spinoza saw God as completely self-caused and infinite in all respects and saw the existence of this God as foundational. In other words, he viewed God, principally, as the ground or source of being. As for all the world's finite forms – the animals, vegetables, and minerals we most associate with "Nature" – he viewed them as mere modes, states, or qualities of the one divine substance.[2] (Unless quoting specifically from a text, I will capitalize the word "Nature" when referring to the world/universe as a whole, and use the small "n" in reference to a thing's basic essence or character, even though Spinoza himself did not capitalize "n" whenever referring to the world as a whole.)

According to Guéret (1977), Spinoza mentioned the word "God" 579 times in the *Ethics*. Readers of that book recognize that these mentions almost invariably served to *affirm* the term. However, not only was it common in his day and in the century after his death to refer to Spinoza as an atheist, but certain contemporary scholars do so as well.

That this moniker was used back in the 17th century is hardly surprising, given that what are now known as "progressive" forms of religion (and widening conceptions of God)[3] were relatively unknown at that time. Spinoza himself, when he discussed the three main considerations for writing the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*), mentioned "the opinion the common people have of me; they never stop accusing me of

2 As an analogy, consider that when you're angry, you're said to have an angry state of mind. That state of mind isn't independent of you; it couldn't exist without you. Similarly, to Spinoza, our bodies and thoughts are viewed as states of God; their very existence and the way we know them depend completely on the one being, the one substance that depends on nothing but itself.

3 I have in mind, for example, the various forms of process theologies that have abounded since the time of Alfred North Whitehead, or alternatively the relational theology of Martin Buber.

atheism, and I am forced to rebut this accusation as well as I can." (Letter 30, to Henry Oldenburg, Oct. 1, 1665, OP IV/166/25-26) Notably, however, Spinoza continued to be widely associated with atheism for most of the 18th century. Much of this was due to the influence of Bayle's *Dictionary*, which claimed, for example, that the *TTP* contained in it the "seeds of atheism" (Gullan-Whur 1988, 305–306). Voltaire, with his characteristic wit, stated – in obvious reference to the *Ethics* – that Spinoza's was "the first atheism which has proceeded by means of lemmas and theorems." (Gullan-Whur 1988, 307) And while Spinoza's reputation grew tremendously after a dispute in 1785 between Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Jacobi over the question of Lessing's Spinozism, it remains the case that Mendelssohn agreed with Jacobi that Spinozism inevitably leads to atheism, among other evils (see Forster 2012, 59–60).

The leading exponent of the Spinoza-as-atheist view today is Professor Steven Nadler. To defend his thesis, Professor Nadler argues that Spinoza made no room for supernaturalism, worshipful awe, the idea that Nature is holy or sacred, or any type of religious experience (Nadler 2007). For Nadler, Spinoza is a naturalist and a rationalist for whom "God just *is* Nature" (Nadler 2011, 147). And Nadler reminds us that Spinoza used the phrase "God, or Nature" to suggest that these words mean the same thing – "just the whole, infinite, eternal, necessarily existing, active system of the universe, within which absolutely everything exists" (Nadler 2011, 86). Nadler concludes that Spinoza leaves us with philosophy and science – that is, secular knowledge – and if there is a faith to be had, it is a faith in the intelligibility of all things (Nadler 2007).

The Spinoza-as-atheist theory rests on the foundation that Spinoza was a believer in Nature and its univocal laws, nothing more and nothing less. But if God is simply Nature, the argument continues, who needs the word "God"? To say, "I believe in Spinoza's God" would then become meaningless. After all, we all believe in Nature and her laws and want to understand those laws. How does that warrant us claiming a belief in any "God" worthy of the term? Indeed, the argument continues, does Spinoza not have more in common with the person who conventionally refutes the existence of God than with one who believes?

Perhaps so, if God is conceived narrowly as including only the most traditional interpretations of the deity of Abraham. But Spinoza didn't confine himself to those conceptions and, as we have seen, did not appreciate being called an atheist. Let us also recall Spinoza's statement that he "intend[ed] to indicate ... things by words whose usual meaning is not entirely opposed to the meaning with which I wish to use them." If you take him at his own words, Spinoza considered his use of the term "God" not entirely opposed to its conventional meaning. I would say that a closer look at his religious philosophy bears that out.

Remember that when it came time to *define* "God" as a term, Spinoza did not focus on the word "Nature," but rather

on "substance" – the ground of being. And he taught, explicitly, that God-as-substance is *indivisible* and *immutable*. (E1p13, E1p20c2) Those are hardly terms we associate with an atheist's view of Nature, which in my experience focuses on what Franz Rozenzweig would call the world's "bubbling plenitude," something that is anything but indivisible. Moreover, when it came time to characterize the domains or planes of existence in which we can find God, Spinoza mentioned extension and thought, and alluded to the existence of infinite other domains or attributes of God that are beyond our capacity to perceive or conceive. In other words, Spinoza makes room for infinite realms of mystery, all of which are grounded in a single immutable, indivisible God. Again, is this atheism? He did not think so, and nor do I.

The word "God" may connote different things to different people, but presumably we all can agree on what it *denotes*: that which/who is truly Ultimate. When someone seems to worship money or status, we refer to them as "false gods." They warrant that moniker because (a) we believe money or status may indeed be of ultimate significance to certain people, and (b) we are nevertheless quite certain that neither is truly Ultimate. By contrast, Spinoza viewed God as Ultimate – in significance, existence, power, perfection ... really, in every way possible. We will see that point developed again later, when we explore how Spinoza's belief in, and love for, God grounded not only his metaphysics but his ethics as well. So even though Spinoza is no less iconoclastic than atheists, his philosophy – if taken at face value – is diametrically opposed to theirs in critical respects.

It would seem compelling, then, to dispense with the Nadlerian critique of Spinoza's religiosity as being grounded in an overly narrow conception of divinity, one to which Spinoza himself would have strenuously objected four centuries ago, and which has become especially antiquated in an era in which progressive religious thinkers and congregations abound. But that does not mean we can so easily ignore the position taken by Mendelssohn and Jacobi that Spinozism *leads to* atheism. Spinoza himself recognized that the philosophy of God he proposed in the *Ethics* is not likely any time soon to assume the status of a majority religion. Just consider the nature of the "universal faith" he sets forth, approvingly, in Chapter XIV of the *TTP*. It includes the principle that "God pardons the sins of those who repent," which is hardly consistent with the philosophy of God propounded in the *Ethics*. Spinoza, famously, concluded the latter book with the statement that "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare," (EVp42s) implicitly recognizing that his teachings about God are not for everyone, and certainly not for anyone who wishes only to dabble in them rather than approaching them with a steadfast earnestness. As such a wise judge of the human condition, Spinoza must have understood that those who jettison the familiar and enticing notions of God-as-parent, God-as-pardoner, God-as-grace-giver, etc. and replace them with a merely casual embrace

of his affirmative teachings about religion and God may well, ultimately, become atheists. Such dabblers can be compared to an amateur trapeze artist who decides to remove her net; the result may depart sharply from the original plan. Still, that is not to say that Spinoza countenanced atheism as a philosophy, let alone as a label for his way of thinking. Any reader of either the *TTP* or the *Ethics* would note the important roles Spinoza assigned to a society's embrace of religion and the belief in God.

III. SPINOZISM AND PANTHEISM

In contemporary times, it is far more common to hear Spinoza referred to as a "pantheist" than an "atheist" or "theist." The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for example, refers to Spinoza in its section on pantheism as "the most famous of all modern pantheists" (Mander 2023). For me, it is certainly more difficult to refute the case that Spinoza is a pantheist than that he is an atheist. That is in part because the term "pantheism" is so ambiguous, including meanings that both do and do not apply to Spinoza's philosophy. Literally, "pantheism" means that the *all* (pan) is God. But when we refer to the "all," do we mean the sum of all worldly things? Do we mean *each and every thing* – individually as well as collectively? Or do we mean all things *and* that which grounds, unifies, and sustains them? Only that third sense of the term would appear to be consistent with Spinozism.

Let us begin with Spinoza's own words. "[S]ome people think the [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*] rests on the assumption that God is one and the same as Nature (by which they understand a certain mass, or corporeal matter). This is a complete mistake." (Letter 73, to Henry Oldenburg, Dec. 1, 1675, OP IV/307a/11-14) To be sure, Spinoza spoke of the "face of the whole Universe, which, however much it may vary in infinite ways, nevertheless remains the same." (See Letter 64 to G.H. Schuller, July 29, 1675, OP IV/278/24-29) Yet as much as that "face" resembles the God of simple pantheism, Spinoza went on to say that it was merely an infinite mode of God, or more specifically, something "produced by the mediation of some infinite modification" of God, rather than something that is identical to God in every respect. (*Ibid.*)

If viewed as equating God with the "all" of Nature, or with "each part" of Nature, pantheism hardly reflects Spinoza's center of gravity. Consider the conventionally pantheistic words of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi (2003, 20): "I believe that people are moving from theism to pantheism. ... What was the objection that people had to pantheism, God is everything? 'Are you prepared to tell me that the excrement of a dog is also God?' And the answer to this would be – 'Yes.' What is wrong with that? It is only from the human perspective that we see a difference between that and challah. On the submolecular level, on the atomic level, they all look the same."

That is not altogether consistent with Spinozism. Spinoza never referred to finite individual forms as God. Nor did he equate the sum total of worldly forms

with God. Recall that his philosophy of God centered on the concept of *substance* – that which is self-caused, and on which all limited forms depend for their existence and for how we understand them. To quote Alan Donagan (1988, 90), "It does not follow ... that the totality of finite things is [Spinoza's] God; for since finite modes are not self-caused, their totality cannot be self-caused either." It is for this reason that Donagan (1988, 90) goes on to assert that "Spinoza is not a pantheist."

Claire Carlisle (2021, 62), in a recent must-read book called *Spinoza's Religion*, made precisely that same assertion. But unlike Donagan, she defended it at length, and in an eye-opening, if not completely satisfactory, way. Carlisle could have subtitled her book, "Taking Substance Seriously," because that is precisely what she did. Rather than accepting the atheist's view that Spinoza's use of the phrase "God, or Nature" means simply that God = Nature, Carlisle flipped the switch. "God is not identical with nature," she argued, "but the *ground* of nature" (emphasis added) – in other words, substance (Carlisle 2021, 68). To prove her point, Carlisle pointed out that Spinoza rarely used the phrase "God, or Nature" in the *Ethics* (it was used twice in E4pref. – OP II/206/24-27 – and twice again in E4p4d) and never in any of the book's propositions or definitions. Thus, to invoke a concept Carlisle emphasized with some force, this phrase was not a "weight-bearing" or foundational part of his system. Stated differently, if Carlisle was a judge, she might say that the phrase "God, or Nature" is more prejudicial than probative in determining Spinoza's center of gravity.

As sympathetic as I am to Carlisle's fundamental point that we must take "substance" seriously in considering the meaning of Spinoza's God, it would appear that she has overstated her point in simply equating God with substance and *not* Nature. While it is notable that Spinoza initially defined God purely in terms of substance and allotted substance primacy when he developed his conception of God further, he clearly incorporated the modes of substance within his notion of the divine. A word Spinoza used in the *Ethics* almost as often as God is "*quatenus*," meaning "insofar as." Spinoza would repeatedly refer to God as both *Natura naturans* (literally, "Nature naturing" – i.e., substance) and as *Natura naturata* ("Nature natured"). The former refers to God *insofar as* God is the self-caused, independent, active principle underlying all that exists. *Natura naturata*, by contrast, refers to God *insofar as* God reflects or manifests the expressions of that active principle – the qualities, states, or properties of substance – all of which depend on substance for their very existence. And Spinoza used the term "God" repeatedly in the *Ethics* to encompass *Natura naturata*, i.e., God's infinite modes.

Consider, for example, Spinoza's statement in his April 1662 letter to Henry Oldenburg: "I do not separate God from nature as everyone known to me has done." (OP IV/36/24-25) Or his claim in EIp29s that God is substance/*Natura naturans* "insofar as he

is considered as a free cause" (by implication, that suggests that God can also be considered as other than a free cause, namely as *Natura naturata; see also* the references to *Natura naturata* in E1p31 and E1p31dem.). Examples of occasions on which Spinoza distinguished between God as substance and God as modal – e.g., "insofar as he is affected [by other modes]" or "insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind" – include references at E2p9, E2p9dem, E2p9cdem, E2p11c, and E2p12dem. At some point, this list became long enough that one should acknowledge it is at least somewhat "weight-bearing;" but that is not to deny our obligation to *additionally* take substance seriously when considering Spinoza's idea of God.

One objection that might be made to the above analysis is that I have so far glossed over the precise wording Spinoza used to define *Natura naturata* (i.e., the modes of God) – "whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, *or* from any of God's attributes, i.e., all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor conceived without God." (E1p29s) Those words, the argument goes, demonstrate that Spinoza did not equate the modes with God (i.e., substance); he merely identified them as flowing from God. But I am not asserting that Spinoza *equated* God simply with his modes. I am merely saying that his concept of divinity *encompasses* the modes, and not merely that which grounds them. Otherwise, he would not have denied that the two are separate and would not have repeatedly spoken of God in both substantial and modal terms. When Spinoza writes that "whatever is, is in God" (E1p15), and "except for substances and modes there is nothing" (E1p15s), I would argue, he is opening our minds to the idea that God subsumes the all, and that nothing – the modes included – should be viewed as outside of or separate from the divine. This perspective is in keeping with the argument that will be further developed in the next section of this paper, which focuses on the centrality of positing God's greatness and grandeur in Spinoza's philosophy. When in doubt, it seems reasonable to *expand* our concept of Spinoza's God, not contract it. This approach is also consistent with our goal of taking Spinoza, who spoke of God in multiple ways, at face value.

Still, while opposing the effort to separate the modes altogether from Spinoza's concept of God, I do not wish to place them at the center of his view of divinity. When one considers the *Ethics* as a whole, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that for Spinoza, thinking of God as substance is not merely one way in which to view God, it is the *fundamental* way. You will note that in providing examples when Spinoza spoke about "God, or Nature" or "God insofar as he is affected/explained by something," I was not speaking about Part I of the *Ethics*. In that foundational portion of the book, Spinoza did not simply define the term but offered an extensive explication of it, and throughout Part I, God is discussed overwhelmingly as substance. Moreover, I recognize that insofar as

God is modal, God resides in the realm of wholes and parts – at one point, Spinoza even referred to the whole of Nature as "one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual." (E2p13L7s) Yet Spinoza never referred to any or all the modes explicitly as "parts of God." That is because substance, the perspective on God that for him is fundamental, is simple and indivisible.

In short, not only did Spinoza define "God" solely in terms of substance, but God's substantial nature should be most fundamental to the way we conceive of God. I would add, however, that it is proper also to think of Spinoza's God, secondarily, in terms of God's modes or qualities. For they are *in* God – that is, they are caused by God, are conceived through God, and express particular states or qualities of God.

It is in this sense of the modes inhering in God – in being dependent upon God-as-substance – that we can probably most aptly refer to Spinozism as *panentheism*, which literally means "the all is in God." This is a term many have adopted, Carlisle among them, and as labels go, it would appear to be the least assailable. As we have seen, Spinoza invokes this same formulation explicitly when he says that "Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God." (E1p15) In this context, when we say the "*all*" is in God, we include the world as we know it, and any additional expressions of God that exist in the realms of extension, thought, and infinite other domains that are imperceptible and inconceivable to a human being. These modes, all of them, inhere in God insofar as God is substance. And for Spinoza, above all else, God is substance. As tempted as we may be to exclusively deify God's modes, or the sum of God's modes, the primacy of God *as substance* – indivisible, immutable, self-sustaining substance – must not be forgotten if we are trying to take Spinoza at face value.

IV. SPINOZA AND GOD-INTOXICATION

The allegations that Spinoza was an atheist, or by contrast, a pantheist, have something important in common. They both portray Spinozism as a fundamentally flat metaphysics. With the Spinozism-as-atheism perspective, Spinoza is invariably credited with doing away with God and upholding only Nature – a word we all study in science class from the first grade onward (in its non-capitalized form) and do not necessarily associate with religion. As for Spinozism-as-simple-pantheism, Spinoza is frequently credited with doing away with Nature and recognizing the reality only of God – the idea being that for him, every finite "mode," including a human being, is either an illusion or merely a "being of reason."[4] This latter perspective was promoted by none less

4 The latter is a term Spinoza invoked in his *Cogita Metaphysica* (CM) to refer to things that "can not in any way be classed as beings," for a being of reason "is nothing but a mode of thinking, which helps us to more easily *retain, explain, and imagine* the things we have understood." (CM Part I, Chapter 1, OP I/233/23-32)

than Hegel, who claimed that Spinoza renounced "all that is determinate and particular, and restricts himself to the One," and by Salomon Maimon, who stated that "[i]n Spinoza's system the unity is real while the diversity is ideal."[5]

Either of these "flat" interpretations is bolstered, to be sure, by the idea that Spinoza's God/Nature/substance expresses itself univocally (with one voice). As Spinoza himself said, "nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, viz. through the universal laws and rules of nature." (EIIIpref., OP II/138/13-18) However we want to label the one voice, we are talking about a simple unity, the argument continues, one that doesn't make room for the kind of hierarchy or sense of transcendence that normally opens the door for religion (as that term is conventionally used), but does make room for the ubiquitous search for intelligibility in every natural phenomenon.

Far be it from me to deny the profound importance in Spinozism of either univocity or the perpetual quest for intelligibility. But that does not require us, I would argue, to attribute to Spinoza a fundamentally flat metaphysics. Indeed, it would appear that the better argument is that Spinoza made room both for God and individual things, that they are in an important sense hierarchically ordered in his system, and that when understood on its own terms, Spinozism is every bit as religious and God-oriented as are the faiths of Abraham.

I once heard Spinozism referred to as the last refuge of a Jewish person who wants to believe in God. Immediately, that statement resonated for me. After centuries on end of discrimination and ghettoization, numerous violent pogroms, the Holocaust, and the analogy of the modern State of Israel to a man who jumps out of a burning building only to fall on someone else, it is difficult for many Jewish people to believe in an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, supernaturalist deity who willed this world into existence as an act of grace. It is much easier, for a Jew like me or the young Baruch Spinoza, to dispense with supernaturalism, stop waiting for divine grace to deliver us from evil, take responsibility as a species for our fate, and rely on the fruits of reason – science, philosophy, and, yes, love – to provide salvation. This is fully consistent with Spinoza's mature philosophy. It explains why non-theist humanists are so enamored of him, and why, for example, that great secular Jew, Sigmund Freud, referred to Spinoza as his "brother in non-faith." (Yovel 1989, 136)

According to Leo Strauss (1965, 27), "modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza." Some might find that statement bizarre, preferring instead to view the concept of

5 These and other statements of Spinoza's alleged "acosmism" are collected and then masterfully debunked by Yitzhak Melamed (2012).

"philosophical religion," of which Spinozism is a classic example, as an oxymoron. Those who hold such a position may argue that Spinoza made insufficient room for the kind of personal relationship with God that is necessary for a belief system to be known as "religious." But again, defining "religion" so narrowly as to exclude anything but the most traditional varieties of faith would appear to be anachronistic. Since 1961, in developing its First Amendment jurisprudence, the U.S. Supreme Court has included within the scope of "religions" such non-traditional sects as ethical culture and secular humanism.[6] Moreover, even among traditional religions, such as Spinoza's ancestral faith of Judaism, numerous branches have sprung up that differ dramatically from each other and their predecessors in terms of both the communities' religious beliefs and their religious practices. Such branching lends support to a definition of Judaism more like that of Mordecai Kaplan, who famously viewed it as an evolving civilization.[7] It would appear that in contemporary terms, any coherent framework for resolving ultimate metaphysical and ethical issues could legitimately be called a religion, no matter how "personal" a relationship is fostered between its adherents and whatever/whoever they view as the Ultimate. Yet, as we will see shortly, even if we define the term "religion" narrowly to exclude any worldview that undermines the fostering of such a personal relationship, a powerful argument could be made to count Spinozism within its ranks.

Neither Novalis nor Goethe came from the Jewish civilization. Still, it was Novalis who termed Spinoza "God-intoxicated," and Goethe who called Spinoza the "most religious." Spinoza was an inspiration to them and many of their German idealist contemporaries. It would be wrong to trivialize this inspiration simply by assuming that they were in agreement with the position espoused by Hegel that Spinoza was an Eleatic monist (i.e., a person who believes that only the One/God is real, and the diversity we perceive in the world is illusory). We have little evidence that such a position has inspired Spinoza's disciples, and indeed, as a statement of his philosophy, it does not hold up well to close scrutiny.

As the *Ethics* wound down and it was time for Spinoza to present the path to inner peace, he taught that the highest

6 *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488, 495 n. 11 (1961).

7 Those who question whether Spinozism could be called religious or is broadly within the ambit of Judaism may point to the fact that Spinoza's religious community excommunicated him in 1656, presumably because of the heretical views he held. Notably, however, when roughly 200 people, including different Spinoza scholars, gathered on April 1, 2012 at Washington D.C.'s Jewish theater, Theater J, to discuss Spinoza's life and philosophy, culminating in a mini-trial as to whether the excommunication should be rescinded if the opportunity presented itself, 79 percent of the attendees voted for rescission. Compared to the climate within the Portuguese-Jewish community of Amsterdam in the mid-17th century, this "evolving civilization" is evidently more friendly to Spinoza in the 21st-century United States, just as it was for the early Zionists who founded the modern state of Israel. See Schwartz (2012, 113–153).

form of knowledge involves understanding the essence of things – individual things. For example, he stated that "To conceive things under a species of eternity ... is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God's essence, as *real beings*... (emphasis added). (EVp30dem.) Spinozism, in fact, posits a realm of infinite multiplicity, or to be more precise, one level of infinite diversity after another after another. We have what he calls "infinitely many things in infinitely many modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect)." (E1p16) To provide some illustrations, (a) God is known through infinite realms or domains of being (the "attributes"), of which "extension" and "thought" are but two instances; (b) in each such domain or attribute, God expresses itself through infinite states of existing (the "modes"), including all the finite beings we observe in the world as well as the principles we commonly refer to as the "laws of Nature;" and (c) in the domain of thought in particular, each mode of God is represented as an idea of that mode in each and every attribute (an idea of an extended body, an idea of an entity in Attribute B, an idea of an entity in Attribute C, etc., onward through infinity).[8] In short, Spinoza has created a world with a veritable cascade of infinite diversity. Yet at the core of his philosophy, fundamentally grounding his ethics and metaphysics alike, is the absolutely infinite, indivisible God. We now turn to the central significance of God in understanding Spinozism both as a philosophy and as a religion.

Spinoza, I believe, conceived his philosophy in a way that would resonate with any devout Muslim: to focus above all else on God's greatness.[9] It is not hard to recognize in his work a hierarchy of sorts that consists of God at the top and every other entity lower down, even though the infinite variety that is "lower" is not metaphysically separate from God and functions critically to express divine power. I see Spinoza as striving to appreciate God in the Anselmian sense as a being than which none greater can be conceived. To Spinoza, such a being could not possibly be created in the image of human beings or our ideals. The true God must instead be absolute infinity – an infinity that, as we have seen, involves infinite diversity within an infinite number of realms of existence, all of which express the essence of a single simple substance. To those who question how such a being could be responsible for a world such as ours, Spinoza offers the following: because God "did not lack material to create all things, from the highest degree of perfection to the lowest; or, to

8 See Melamed (2013, 153–204) for an even more complete description of the cascade of infinities inherent in Spinoza's philosophy.

9 Consider in connection with this statement the common Muslim phrase, "Allahu Akbar." Conventionally translated as "God is the greatest," the more precise meaning is "God is greater," meaning that however great a human being thinks God is, the true God is greater than we can possibly conceive God to be. Given that Spinoza claimed that God has infinite attributes of which we can only know two (extension and thought), this phrase resonates beautifully with the spirit of Spinozism.

speak more properly, because the laws of [God's] nature have been so ample that they sufficed for producing all things which can be conceived by an infinite intellect." (internal quotation marks removed) (E1app., OP II/83/27-32)

Some scholars refer to Spinoza's embrace of what Arthur Lovejoy (1957, 52) has called the Principle of Plenitude, that "no genuine potentiality of being can remain unfulfilled, that the extent and abundance of the creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a 'perfect' and inexhaustible Source." For Spinoza, God is that source. We can debate whether the Principle of Plenitude or some alternative (such as the Principle of Sufficient Reason) was fundamental for Spinoza. But what seems clear is that once he came to embrace the Principle of Plenitude and took stock in the God that represents the perfect and inexhaustible source, that God would never leave center stage in Spinoza's reality.

Moreover, in Spinozism, this God we have been discussing is not merely central to metaphysics; it becomes foundational for ethics as well. For Spinoza, contemplating the true God generates a love that can be profoundly transformative. The love toward this God "is associated with all the affections of the body, which all encourage it. And so, it must engage the Mind most." (EVp16dem.) By this and similar statements in Part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza tells us to develop our knowledge of God further by contemplating what is limited and relating that to its divine source. This can enhance our love for God to the point where such love so dominates our mind that "insofar as we understand God to be the cause of Sadness, we rejoice." (EVp18s)

Let us pause on that point. For Spinoza, "Eternity is the very essence of God insofar as this involves necessary existence." (EVp30dem.) And by contemplating this eternal God – the one whose self-expressions necessarily unfold in just the manner that they do because this follows from God's very nature – we no longer need to feel pain when we recognize some stupid mistake we made, or some act of injustice perpetrated by another. Rather, our reflection on the true God is so potent and wholesome that our pain turns to pleasure – for we know that what exists is what must exist, and nobody is to blame, as we are witnessing the handiwork of the perfect God.[10] Is this not the reasoning of a religious man? Do you know atheists who reason like that?

According to Spinoza, the love toward God "cannot be stained by an affect [emotion] of envy, nor by an affect of jealousy," (EVp20dem.) and "there is no affect which is directly contrary to this Love by which it can be destroyed." (EVp20s) Accordingly, our love toward God "is the most constant of all affects." (*Ibid.*) To contemplate Spinoza's God is to remind ourselves that God alone is the ultimate indwelling or ground of every limited thing that exists. It is to

10 Notably, when it came time to define "perfection," Spinoza stated merely that "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing." (E2d6)

regard the world and all its infinite diversity from the standpoint of eternity, which includes focusing our attention first and foremost on God.

In Spinozism, our love toward God grounds our inner peace and our ability to increase our power of activity, just as God-as-substance grounds the existence of the things in the world and how we understand them. Our love toward God, in other words, forms the basis of our love for ourselves and everyone else, and for Spinoza, that is truly liberating. "The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God" (EVp24), he wrote, and that breeds even more love. Spinoza even invoked the religious term "blessedness" (*beatitudo*) when he taught that by contemplating God, we can fight the scourge of hatred and attain the goal of self-contentment or blessedness.

It would appear to follow from the above that the idea of "God" is imbued with as much meaning and affection for Spinoza as for any traditional devotee of an organized religion. Yet when Spinoza spoke about the highest form of human affection for God, he used a term that is anything but traditional: the "intellectual love of God." Near the end of the *Ethics*, Spinoza stated that the love of God that is supreme for its durability and contribution to blessedness is none other than an "intellectual" love. His precise words were that we can develop a love of God, "not insofar as we imagine him as present but insofar as we understand God to be eternal. And this is what I call intellectual love of God." (EVp32c)

That phrase, the *intellectual love of God*, has become the ultimate bridge between Spinoza the Secularist and Spinoza the Theologian. Those who see Spinozism as opposed to religion effectively rid the phrase of the word "love" – or at least any resemblance to its traditional meaning – choosing instead to believe that Spinoza is locating our salvation in studying "God, or Nature" through philosophy and science. By contrast, those who see Spinozism as fundamentally religious remind us that the word "love" is very much a part of his prescription. We must love God and love God supremely, even if this love is of the intellectual variety – in other words, we must use our minds to love the God that *is*, not simply the God we might want to create in the image of our own anthropomorphic ideals. Personally, once again, I am advocating taking Spinoza at face value; the "intellectual love" of God may be contrastable to a blind emotional faith in the deity, but to interpret it as a completely affectless state of being is to distort the term way beyond Spinoza's intent when he included the term "love" in his formulation.

Before concluding, let us address two final questions. First, is it fair to say that Spinozism is essentially a hierarchical system in which God is at the top and everything else – all the modes – is lower down? Can we say, in other words, that Spinozism makes room for "transcendence" in a way that is truly religious? The only way to answer that question honestly is to return to what is perhaps the second most important word in Spinoza's unique vocabulary next to *deus*

(God). I am referring once again to *quatenus* (insofar as).[11] Concise summaries of where Spinoza stands on the questions of religious philosophy are typically elusive because he usually stands on one side of the divide *insofar as* we look at the matter one way, and on the other side *insofar as* we look at the matter from an alternative standpoint. In examining the existence of hierarchy in Spinoza's view of reality, we must conclude that such a hierarchy exists *insofar as* we think of God, as opposed to other entities, as (a) both central and fundamental to our understanding of reality, (b) the only being endowed with an infinity of attributes, and (c) the singular appropriate focal point if we wish to live a fulfilling and constructive life here on earth. However, *insofar as* we are considering whether God is hierarchically superior in the sense of residing in a realm that is somehow more elevated and pure (or, if you prefer, "heavenly") than where the rest of us reside, then unquestionably there is no such element in Spinoza's thought. To that important degree, his system, his reality, is indeed flat.

Secondly, can we say that Spinozism makes room for the kind of personal relationship between the Spinozist and God that is worthy of the term "religious"? Again, the answer depends – in this case, on how willing we are to recognize as "religious" a personal relationship that is not completely traditional in the Abrahamic sense of the word. Spinoza himself was indubitably more of a rigorous, systemic logical rationalist than he was a mystic. Neither his biography nor his writings suggest that he engaged in meditation or prayer, or otherwise addressed God in the second person. But our topic here is not simply Spinoza the man but the ideas he generated and their ability to inspire his readers. When Goethe proclaimed his "evening prayer" to be Spinoza's proposition that "he who loves God cannot desire that God should love him in return" (Boyle 1997, 278), Goethe was not simply affirming Spinoza's unwillingness to worship a God who loves us as a human does but was issuing a challenge to himself to love God deeply *without* anthropomorphizing the divine. Spinoza's God may be approached in many ways that resonate with traditional religion – not only as one who challenges us and is deeply beloved, but also as a benefactor, a source of enchantment … the list goes on. No, one cannot expect to direct petitional prayers to this God and have them answered, but "religion" in the contemporary sense of the term encompasses so much more than praying for supernatural assistance.

In short, students of Spinozism who wish to interact with the text religiously, and not merely philosophically, will find certain paths closed to them but others to be opened. At a time when one of the fastest-growing religious worldviews is "none of the above," Spinozism presents options for those who cannot abide a belief in the supernatural, but nevertheless wish to base their ethics on a conception of God worthy of Anselm's formulation, and to make this God their

11 According to Guéret (1977), Spinoza used the word *quatenus* 442 times in the *Ethics*. See Newlands (2018, 44, n. 8).

ultimate concern. Goethe, for one, says that you can still love the Spinozist God and make that love the focal point of your daily prayers. Even a traditionalist would have trouble denying the importance of that emotion of love as a foundation for Abrahamic religiosity.

CONCLUSION

You and I are said to be living during a Spinoza renaissance, when academic philosophers, novelists, and even playwrights are rediscovering Spinoza as a relevant thinker, four centuries after he lived. Primarily, this renaissance consists of confronting Spinoza as a *secular* thinker – some might even say as the first modern secular thinker. Let us not forget, however, that there was an earlier Spinoza renaissance, one that was based in Germany during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In that renaissance, it was Spinoza as a *religious* figure that so captivated and inspired some of the time's greatest minds.

Yes, he was widely recognized, even by some of his followers, as a heretic, who had many negative things to say about the "God of man's making," just as he had positive things to say about the "God that is."[12] But if Spinoza had confined himself to iconoclasm, mockery, and the desire to rid our species of religion and God root and branch, he would not be Spinoza. He would not have so inspired Goethe, Heine, Herder, Lessing, Novalis, and many others, who looked for an alternative to both traditional theism and atheism and weren't trapped by the fallacy of the excluded middle.

Professor Nadler is, of course, correct, that Spinoza not only refused to adopt many traditionally religious metaphysical beliefs, but also did not promote various traditional religious experiences or activities. But it would be a mistake to assume that simply because Spinoza left us with incomplete information about how his teachings might function as a religion, a person's relationship to God must be an emotionally empty experience for his panentheist followers. Rather, Spinoza could be seen as liberating those of his readers who wish to take his use of the word "God" at face value – as a God that is the center of our emotional lives and not merely our metaphysical views – to determine exactly how they wish to relate to divinity and to make that determination one of the fundamental challenges of their lives. In other words, far from leaving his closest readers with a directive to become anti-religious and anti-God, Spinoza can be seen as having left them with a challenge as to how to become *philosophically religious*. Again, all things excellent ....

At least, that is my perspective on Spinoza and Spinozism. I will leave to each of you how to view this chameleon for yourselves. My primary request is that you allow Spinoza as much as possible to play the role of potter and not merely to serve as your clay. In an era in which the news is increasingly told by people with unabashed agendas, we

12 These terms are the two chapter headings in the "On God" portion of Dagobert Runes' abridged version of Spinoza's *Ethics* (Runes 1957, 167–180).

must restrain our own tendency to make Spinoza's words fit our own mouths.

His philosophy had a center of gravity. And 579 times in the *Ethics*, that involved returning to the word "God." Presumably, that word had significance to Spinoza above and beyond what people generally mean by "nature," with or without a capital "n". The word "God," or what it represented, was his greatest beloved. All the rest, as Hillel might say, is commentary. Now go study.

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