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Spinoza's theory of religion : the importance of religion in Spinoza's thought and its implications for state and society
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Cover Page



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2. Spinoza's Philosophical Religion in the *Ethics* and Other Works

Did Spinoza truly think of his philosophy as a religion? Or is the pious language he used a smokescreen to hide the fact that his teachings in fact are the opposite of what religious people believe? In order to answer these questions this chapter looks at Spinoza's philosophical system. Is this the system of an atheist or of a religious man?

The first section discusses the difficulty of defining concepts such as 'atheism', 'God', and 'religion'.

The second section sketches the dominant theme in all of Spinoza's writings: the search for salvation by means of knowledge of God.

The third section highlights some of the positions in the long debate on Spinoza's perceived atheism.

The fourth section describes Spinoza's metaphysics. Can Spinoza be called a philosophical naturalist? After studying Spinoza's reaction to Oldenburg's suggestion that he, according to some, appeared to be an atheist because of his equation of God with Nature, the chapter turns to Spinoza's definition of God in the *Ethics*.

The fifth section tries to come to a deeper understanding of Spinoza's main theme. It does so by researching the path to salvation by means of the different kinds of knowledge, outlined in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza's notion of 'salvation' and his distinction between 'three kinds of knowledge' are analyzed. Spinoza's ultimate kind of knowledge seems to be a kind of mysticism in which we, by means of an inner transformation, caused by knowledge, come to experience God and his infinite power in every little thing that exists.

The sixth and final section analyzes Spinoza's own defense against the charge of atheism in his reaction to the critique of Van Velthuysen.

2.1. Defining Atheism, God, and Religion

Was Spinoza an atheist? Spinoza claimed again and again that he was *not*. However, his conception of God, in which God is *not* understood as a person, a king, a judge or a law-giver, but is said to be in some way equivalent to Nature, is, according to some, already enough to call him an atheist. Jonathan Israel, for example, writes: 'Admittedly, Spinoza indignantly rejects the designation 'atheist' but this is because he was not an 'atheist' under the terms of his own (and other Early Enlightenment materialists') redefining of the term 'atheism' to mean refusal to acknowledge the natural order and the obligations of the rational man. In terms of what was normally meant by 'atheism' during the Enlightenment, namely denial of all supernatural agency

in the cosmos, including rejection of a providential God who created and guides the cosmos, and watches over the actions of men, Spinoza unquestionably was an ‘atheist’.¹

In this citation Israel makes an important distinction between, on the one hand, the way in which Spinoza understood ‘atheism’ himself, and, on the other hand, the way in which atheism was understood by others. What I am most interested in is how Spinoza understood ‘atheism’ himself², and why this particular definition of ‘atheism’ might have lead him to the conclusion that he himself was not an atheist. I find this most important, because my aim in this dissertation is to understand Spinoza in the way in which he understood himself. Apparently Spinoza (but also others, such as his close friend, Jarig Jelles) strongly believed that Spinoza’s philosophical convictions did not surmount to mere atheism. What I like to understand are the reasons why he made such a claim. Was this mere strategy to avoid persecution by the religious authorities or did he seriously believe he himself was not an atheist?

What Israel implies in the cited passage is that people in the seventeenth century considered theism and atheism different *ways of thinking about the world*. But did Spinoza and his contemporaries really discuss theism and atheism in such theoretical terms? The following citation from Verbeek suggests otherwise: ‘In the 17th century an atheist is someone who denies, not necessarily, the existence, but in any case the will of God – if the atheist denies God’s existence at all it is in order to be able to deny God’s will and do as he pleases’.³

Atheism in the seventeenth century, according to Verbeek, is not so much about one’s worldview, but is defined as a kind of immorality, the idea that one may do as one pleases. John Locke, for example, argued against tolerating atheists on the basis that they lacked morality: an atheist cannot be trusted to keep his oaths.⁴ Spinoza also seems to have a very practical definition of atheism as he most strongly reacts against the suggestion that atheism is unrelated to the way in which people live.⁵

However, someone such as Israel might object, why should we follow Spinoza’s take on theism and atheism? Shouldn’t we apply a commonsensical approach and study words in the way they are used in ‘ordinary language’? And if we do so, wouldn’t we then see that Spinoza’s conception of God and religion are completely at odds with the way we (or the people in the

¹ Israel (2006), p. 45, 46

² I do not agree that he himself defied atheism in the way Israel describes it as ‘denying the refusal to acknowledge the natural order and the obligations of the rational man’. Spinoza, rather defines atheism as the idea that God should not be acknowledged and loved as the highest good, leading people to love money, sex and fame. See section 2.6 of this chapter. I also do not agree that Spinoza should be called a ‘materialist’ and an ‘empiricist’ as Israel does. See section 2.3.5 of this chapter.

³ Verbeek (2003), p. 4

⁴ Locke (2010), p. 37. See also David (2003).

⁵ See 2.6.

seventeenth century) would normally understand someone who uses these words? What is neglected in such an approach is the extent to which ideas about who or what is to be considered 'pious' and 'theist' and who or what is to be considered 'a heretic' and an 'atheist' is part of an ongoing power struggle, and therefore subjected to change: 'In the second half of the seventeenth century the term 'atheism' had a very vague meaning denoting all kinds of deviate behavior. Some of its many equivalents were superstition, idolatry, irreligion, libertinage, deism, Machiavellianism, indifferentism, neutralism, Socinianism and heterodoxy in general'.⁶

In other words, when one analyzes ordinary language one finds the dominant orthodox beliefs to be called 'theist' and the heterodox beliefs to be called 'atheist'. What is considered 'orthodox' changes from time to time and place to place. But even if this were not the case, and an orthodoxy would be installed that would dominate the religion forever, repressing all heterodox opinions, would it then be justified for a scientist to call anyone who is religious in a non-orthodox way an atheist? Wouldn't this scientist interfere in a theological-political struggle between believers, taking the side of one party against the other?

This is why the question whether someone is an atheist or not is not merely a scientific or philosophical question, but is also to be considered *a theological-political question*. Spinoza addresses this question in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. His main argument is there that the Bible allows for different opinions about God. Spinoza's opponents, people such as Voetius, judged otherwise. This only shows that the theological-political debate on who is to be considered an atheist allows for a wide variety of opinions.⁷ What I am interested in is the reconstruction of Spinoza's explicit and implicit arguments as to why he is not an atheist.

Can We Demarcate Theism From 'Pseudo-Theism'?

Atheism literally means non-theism. If theism is believing in the existence of God (or gods), then atheism would be the belief that there is no God (or no gods). If such a definition is used, Spinoza is not an atheist, because for him God exists by necessity. (E-Ip11, p. 222)

But is atheism really incompatible with believing in the existence of God? According to today's most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, this is not the case. 'Much unfortunate confusion', he writes, 'is caused by the failure to distinguish what can be called Einsteinian

⁶ Krop (2011), p. 165.

⁷ Fukuoka (2018), p. 93.

religion from supernatural religion'.⁸ This 'Einsteinian religion' is believing in the existence of Spinoza's God.⁹

A frequently discussed problem in the philosophy of science is the so-called 'demarcation problem': what is the criterion that we can use in order to adequately distinguish between science and pseudo-science? A comparable problem exists in the philosophy of religion: what criterion can help us to demarcate between theists and 'pseudo-theists'? The criterion that Dawkins put forward is the belief in the existence of a *personal* God. If someone believes in a personal God, this person is a theist. If someone believes that such a personal God does *not* exist, that person is an atheist.¹⁰

But using this criterion would mean that some people who are generally and almost universally held to be theists would need to be considered to really be atheists. Maimonides, for example, the greatest philosopher in the tradition of Judaism, rejected the idea of a personal God.¹¹ In Maimonides' negative theology God is unique in every respect. Therefore, he cannot be adequately understood as belonging to a class of things that have personhood. Would this mean that, according to Dawkins, also Maimonides is an atheist?¹² Additionally, one might ask: if someone who believes in God, but not in a personal God, is to be considered an atheist, how do we refer to someone who rejects the idea of God in its entirety? There may be very devout people for whom worship and religion are an important part of life who do not accept the idea of a personal God. Yet would we call such people atheists?

As an atheist is defined as someone who denies the existence of God, the discussion quickly progresses to the question: *Quid sit Deus?* According to some there is 'an official concept of God'¹³ of which the atheist says: 'this God does not exist'. This 'official God' is said to comprise of the following characteristics: 1) unity, God is one; 2) self-existent, God is a *causa sui*; 3) eternal;

⁸ Dawkins (2006), p. 13

⁹ On April 24 of the year 1929 Einstein received a cablegram from Rabbi Herbert Goldstein of the Institutional Synagogue, New York. The rabbi asked him: 'Do you believe in God? Stop. Answer paid 50 words.' Einstein replied: 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings.' Schilpp (1970), p. 60. For Dawkins this reply does not make Einstein a theist. Einstein, according to Dawkins, is 'a religious atheist', because he did not believe in a personal God.

¹⁰ Besides theism and atheism there is also deism, pantheism and panentheism. Deism is the idea of God as the great watchmaker. God created everything and made the laws of nature, but after he did that, stopped interfering, letting nature function on its own. Pantheism is the idea that God is to be found in everything in nature. There is something divine in every cloud, tree, and ant. Panentheism is the notion that everything is contained in God. Now, Spinoza is not a deist, because he doesn't believe in God as a creator, nor does he believe that God does not play an active role anymore in making everything function. Spinoza can also not be called a pantheist, because he doesn't think that trees or other natural phenomena are in some sense holy or worth our veneration. Panentheism comes closest to his position as everything, according to Spinoza, is *in* God.

¹¹ Kessler (2007), p. 42-44

¹² Strauss seems to imply that in fact he was. See: Goldman (2010).

¹³ The term comes from feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether and is taken over by Cliteur (2010), p. 177.

God stands outside time; 4) creator, everything is created and governed by God; 5) transcendent, God is distinct from his creation; 6) omnipotent. God has absolute power; 7) omniscient, He knows everything; 8) personal, God is a person; 9) perfectly good, God is perfect in every respect; 10) holy, God is worth our veneration; 11) interventionist, God intervenes in history; 12) judge, God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked.¹⁴

But how many of these beliefs does someone have to share in order to be called a theist? If someone would not believe in all 12, but would believe in most of them, would this make him an atheist? And how exactly are we to interpret terms such as ‘omnipotence’ and ‘omniscience’? Is there only one valid interpretation of these terms? Or can several different interpretations be allowed?¹⁵

That these questions matter, becomes clear if we look at the case of Spinoza, who would agree that God has these characteristics, but who would reinterpret them in a way which is not orthodox.¹⁶ This shows, that if one would accept the idea of an ‘official concept of God’, one would still be left with all kinds of problems once one tries to apply it in order to demarcate theism from atheism.

But is there really an ‘official concept of God’? Doesn’t the history and anthropology of religion reveal a continuous struggle within different religious traditions about the nature and concept of God, where formal concepts are continually challenged?

Maybe it is this problem of ‘the official concept of God’ that has made Dawkins add that an atheist – at least in the modern period - not only denies the existence of a personal God, but also embraces ‘philosophical naturalism’: ‘An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural

¹⁴ Cliteur (2010), p. 179-180.

¹⁵ According to Spinoza there is no such a thing as ‘official model of God’. Everyone may adapt the idea of God to his own understanding and interpret it in such a way that it makes it easier for him to obey God’s divine law. (TTP XIV-11, p. 183)

¹⁶ Of the 12 mentioned characteristics Spinoza can be said to explicitly embrace criterion 1, 2 and 3. See for example the Appendix to Ethics I where Spinoza writes that ‘God is one’, that ‘he necessarily exists’, and that ‘he is and acts solely from the necessity of his own nature’. With regard to criterion 4: God did not literally ‘create’ the universe *ex nihilo*, but everything does flow forth out of God. With regard to criterion 5: God is not the transcendent, but the immanent cause of all things. (E-IP18, p. 229; Letter 73, p. 942). Spinoza would again agree with 6: God is all powerful, because there is nothing outside God. (E-IP34, p. 238). In a qualified sense he would agree with 7: all thoughts are contained in God’s infinite intellect. (E-IIp1, p. 245). Spinoza would not agree with criterion 8: God is not a person. (E-I Appendix, p. 239). However, the common people benefit from understanding Him in this way. He would also disagree with criterion 9: goodness does not pertain to the nature of God, since goodness is a product of the human imagination. However, God is described as ‘perfect’, because there is nothing lacking from the divine nature (E-I Appendix, p. 241-242) and as an ‘exemplar of true life’, because ‘all things exist and act through Him, and therefore we understand them through Him and see what is true, right and good through Him.’ (TTP XIV-11, p. 183). Spinoza does not believe in the final two characteristics of God, because they are products of the prophetic imagination. He, however does think that these products of the imagination are useful, and can help people to lead better lives.

creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles - except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand'.

Atheism, according to Dawkins, is equivalent to philosophical naturalism, in which nature is understood as the 'physical world'. It arguably was and still is the interpretation of Spinoza as a philosophical naturalist who equated God with Nature which has given him his reputation as an atheist.¹⁷ However, he himself denied that he was a philosophical naturalist in the sense described by Dawkins. Although he does reject the 'supernatural', nature is not confined to the existence of physical matter, according to Spinoza, as we will see.¹⁸ The case of Spinoza shows that it remains difficult to formulate the demarcation criteria that can separate theist from non-theist positions.¹⁹

Religion Described By Means of Family Resemblances

'To define religion', Max Weber writes at the very beginning of his book on the subject, 'to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study'.²⁰ This denial to define religion at the outset of a study has been criticized on the grounds that of course one has a definition of 'religion' in mind when one starts to study the subject sociologically, as Weber does, singling certain aspects out for research while leaving others out of consideration. Although this criticism is justified, there is also something to say in favor of Weber's position: the definition of religion will always be a matter of dispute, and therefore it would be wise to have this discussion on a case by case basis, rather than in the abstract.

The other great sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim, – in contradistinction to Weber – *has defined* religion as 'A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them'.²¹ What is striking about the definition of Durkheim is that he does not think that belief either in the 'supernatural' or in a 'deity' is a necessary condition for a religion. Instead he speaks of the category of 'the sacred'. What also stands out in his definition is that religion is not only about beliefs but also about *practices*. Maybe most important in his definition of religion is its capacity to *unite* people in a community.

One aspect that seems to be lacking in the definition of Durkheim is *religious experience*. When the philosopher and psychologist William James tried to define religion it was this aspect

¹⁷ Harris (1997), p. 33-41.

¹⁸ See 2.2.

¹⁹ Spinoza also denied that miracles could exist (TTP, chapter VI). He, however, does write that 'the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed along with the body, but something of it remains, which is eternal.' (E-Vp23, p. 374)

²⁰ Weber (1965), p. 1.

²¹ Durkheim (1995), p. 44.

that he singled out: 'Religion (...) shall mean for us the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine'.²² The definitions of Durkheim and James can be considered as two extremes: Durkheim neglects personal religious experiences, but James neglects the effect of religions to create unified groups.

The idealist British philosopher, T.L.S. Sprigge has been influenced by James's approach. He considers this approach to be a form of 'religious realism'²³, because James is most of all interested in the real, psychological effects of having certain beliefs and practices. Sprigge has argued, using James's 'realist' religious approach, that Spinozism can be understood as a religion.²⁴ According to Sprigge a religion 'normally comprises five factors: (1) a set of beliefs about the world, (2) an emotional response to the world thus conceived, (3) a system of moral precepts somehow deriving from these beliefs, (4) certain ceremonial practices, and (5) an institutional organization exerting authority over the members of the religion'.²⁵

Spinozism could, according to Sprigge, be called a religion 'as consisting of certain beliefs which are in some sense about spiritual matters, certain emotions prompted by these beliefs, and a set of moral precepts deriving from them'. Just as Sprigge I hold the view that 'this combination is capable of playing something like the same role in an individual's life as a religion in the fuller sense does for its members'.²⁶ Sprigge thinks that Spinozism would function as a religion for the person who believes that Spinoza in his philosophy has succeeded in formulating the true philosophy. But it is maybe more precise to argue that Spinoza's philosophy functioned at least for one person as a religion, and that is for Spinoza himself.

Because of the great variety of different religions and because of the great historical variety of different orthodox and heterodox interpretations within each of these religions, it is hard to name that what is essential to religion.²⁷ Instead of trying to identify a single essence of religion, we do better to follow Sprigge's example, and show that all these different religions share certain, what Ludwig Wittgenstein has called, family resemblances.²⁸

As we saw in the cited definition of William James religion on an individual level comprises of beliefs, practices and experiences, but on a social level it, as Durkheim has pointed out, also has to do with a social identity and with the establishment of certain institutions that make the

²² James W (1902), p. 31.

²³ Sprigge (2005), p. 191-202.

²⁴ Sprigge (1995), p. 137-163

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Sprigge (1995), p. 142

²⁷ Leezenberg (2007), p. 13-15.

²⁸ Wittgenstein (1958), p. 32-33.

group last. These different dimensions of religion can also be classified in terms that make them more similar to philosophical disciplines. Religion can then be said to have 1) a metaphysics, ontology or certain worldview in which the notions of eternity, timelessness and immortality, as well as those of unity, oneness and wholeness and of almightiness, omniscience and omnipresence often (but not always) play an important role.

Apart from these metaphysical notions religions also bear family resemblances in that they provide us 2) with certain ethical-political tools that help us to deal with suffering, sin and death in order that we can find some sort of salvation, enlightenment or lasting happiness. Religions provide us therefore with things such as holy laws, divine rewards for good behavior and divine punishments for bad behavior, rules for living well as an individual, rules for living well as being part of a community, perfect examples we are encouraged to follow, and bad examples that function as a warning to us.

Religions provide us 3) with certain practices that can be described phenomenologically and that help us to experience the divine, such as sermons, rituals, prayers, meditation-sessions, exercises, songs, readings, dancing, etcetera.

In order to make the world-view, the ethical norms and the religious practices part of our daily lives religions also 4) know some sort of political-institutional organization or hierarchy, a clergy that is more or less freed from work so they can devote their time entirely to the study and teaching of religion.

Religion is also accompanied by a social-political 5) brotherhood, a community, an identity, and a tradition which encompasses the living, the dead, and those not yet born.

2.2. A Persistent Theme Throughout Spinoza's Life

Because I want to explore the possibility that Spinoza's philosophy functioned as a religion for himself, I will start on an autobiographical note. A further reason to begin the discussion on Spinoza's alleged atheism with his own life is that some have argued that the biographical fact that Spinoza was banned from the Jewish community in Amsterdam already reveals his 'atheism'. So, let us start by recalling some facts about Spinoza's life.

Baruch Spinoza, born 24 November, 1632, had to become wise fast, as he did not have an easy youth, and he was dead already at age 44. His life as a child, teenager, and young adult was tainted with a series of events that must have caused the young Spinoza intense grief and distress. His mother Deborah died on November 5, 1638 as Spinoza was about to turn six years old. On 24 September 1649, Spinoza was then sixteen years old, when his slightly older brother, Isaac, died at age seventeen. Three years later, October 23, 1652, his older sister Miriam died.

Two years later, Spinoza's father Michael suddenly died, making Spinoza, an orphan at the age of twenty-one.

Now he had to take over the family business in the import-export of fruits, together with his brother Gabriel. He soon found out that he had inherited a debt from his father, who had become responsible for managing the bankruptcy settlement of another Jewish merchant. Spinoza was able to escape these financial obligations by turning to Dutch law, instead of Jewish law. In March 1656 he was released from the obligation to pay his father's debt by the Supreme Court of Holland. Four months later, on July 27th of the year 1656, the most well-known biographical fact in Spinoza's life took place. He, then 23 years old, was officially banned from the Jewish community of Amsterdam.²⁹

The Ban

The text of the excommunication (Hebrew: *herem*) is the following: 'The Senhores of the Mahamad make it known that they have long since been cognizant of the wrong opinions and behavior of Baruch d'Espinoza, and tried various means and promises to dissuade him from his evil ways. But as they effected no improvement, obtaining on the contrary more information every day of the horrible heresies which he practiced and taught, and of the monstrous actions which he performed, and as they had many trustworthy witnesses who in the presence of the same Espinoza reported and testified against him and convicted him; and after all this has been investigated by the rabbis, they decided with the consent of these that the same Espinoza should be excommunicated and separated from the people of Israel, as they now excommunicate him with the following ban (...) We order that nobody should communicate with him orally or in writing, or show him any favor, or stay with him under the same roof, or come within four ells of him, or read anything composed or written by him'.³⁰

Read with the knowledge of hindsight, the text of the *herem* seems to suggest that Spinoza was condemned for holding his philosophical beliefs ('wrong opinions'), for expressing them in public ('which he (...) taught'), and for acting upon them ('monstrous actions'), and that this was something which was already going on for quite a while ('long since been cognizant').³¹ However, '[a]s the matter stands, many key questions remain about Spinoza's problematic relations (if any) with the Sephardic community as well as the exact reason for his sudden expulsion. The *herem* imposed on him may well relate to the bleak financial situation of his father's estate, rather than

²⁹ Van de Ven (2011), p. 4-10.

³⁰ Quoted in Klever (1996a), p. 16.

³¹ Klever suggests this as he highlights these parts of the *herem* by placing them in Italics.

to the philosopher's opinions in matters of religious revelation as is often assumed. (...) So much is clear: there are no archival sources, testimonies or writings whatsoever to confirm or prove that Spinoza had any deviant ideas or publicly preached at the time'.³²

Although the wording of the *herem* is particularly harsh, Spinoza, according to his biographer Lucas reacted in the following way: 'All the better; they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done to my own accord if I did not dread scandal. But, since they want it in this way, I enter gladly on the path that is opened to me, with the consolation that my departure will be way more innocent than was the exodus of the early Hebrews from Egypt'.³³ It seems then that Spinoza, had already departed the synagogue, at least in spirit. Klever writes that Spinoza was not present during the *herem*, because he had already 'converted' to another outlook on life.³⁴

Spinoza Announces His Project

This term 'conversion' seems to be rather apt if we read the first lines of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, a work which scholars believe to be Spinoza's earliest piece of writing. According to Mignini, Spinoza began writing it shortly after his excommunication at the end of 1656 or at the beginning of the year 1657.³⁵ The TIE starts in the following way: 'After experience had taught me the hollowness and futility of everything that is ordinarily encountered in daily life, and I realized that all the things which were the source and object of my anxiety held nothing of good or evil in themselves save insofar as the mind was influenced by them, I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity'. (TIE 1, p. 3).

³² Van de Ven (2011), p.11.

³³ Nadler (1999), p. 154

³⁴ Since Judaism is not a 'faith', but a people with a faith, it was more than a conversion. From a Jewish perspective it was, as Hermann Cohen has called it a 'betrayal'. Spinoza turned his back on Judaism. He writes about Jews in a distant, cold, sometimes even quite hostile way. The crudest example of this is that he, a son of Jews who had to escape Spain and Portugal because of religious persecution, writes that 'it is not at all surprising that, after separating themselves from all the nations in this way, they brought the resentment of all men upon themselves, not only because of their external rites which are contrary to the rites of other nations, but also by the sign of circumcision which they zealously maintain.' (TTP III-12, p. 55) Different from Maimonides, Spinoza did not use the gift of his extraordinary intellect to help his people to reinterpret and refine the tradition. Instead, he decided that it would be better to leave Judaism behind, and to embrace the universal philosophical religion, which he tried to popularize by presenting it as an adapted form of Christianity.

³⁵ Mignini (1979).

These lines are reminiscent of Descartes' *Meditations* in which he writes that he finally took the time to question whether there is a stable base for our knowledge.³⁶ Spinoza's ultimate goal, however, is not of an epistemological but of a religious nature. He seeks 'the preservation of our being' (TIE 7, p. 4), meaning salvation or lasting happiness.³⁷ This salvation is found in the supreme good: 'the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature' (TIE 13, p. 6).

Spinoza in this youthful work writes 'Nature' and not 'God'. This could be interpreted as a sign of Spinoza's anti-religious naturalism. One could read 'the preservation of our being' then simply as the best way to survive, comparable to something that Hobbes might have written. This purely naturalistic interpretation, however, becomes highly unlikely if we read the seriousness with which Spinoza approaches the subject. For, he describes the normal situation in which he finds himself in as a 'disease' that is in desperate need for a 'cure': 'For I saw that my situation was one of great peril and that I was obliged to seek a remedy with all my might, however uncertain it might be, like a sick man suffering from a fatal malady who, foreseeing certain death unless a remedy is forthcoming, is forced to seek it, however uncertain it be, with all his might, for therein lies all his hope' (TIE 7, p. 4).

Spinoza not only wants to achieve this union of the mind with the entirety of nature, he wants to do what he can in order that 'many can acquire it along with me' (TIE 14, p. 6). In other words, Spinoza wants to convert as many people as possible to his religious outlook. This is the main task to which he devoted the rest of his short life.

The Theme in All His Works

That Spinoza's philosophical-religious project is about finding salvation is confirmed by the last chapters of the *Short Treatise on the Improvement of the Intellect*, which Spinoza presumably wrote between 1660 and 1662.³⁸ Therein he speaks of 'our blessedness' which consists out of the mind's union with God, established by the knowledge of God that leads to the love of God (ST 2-22, p. 94). This union with God saves us from death (ST 2-23, p. 95), and gives us joy in God and peace of mind. (ST 2-24, p. 96). In 1665 Spinoza writes to Blyenbergh that 'our supreme blessedness consists in love towards God, and that this love flows necessarily from the knowledge of God that is so heartily urged on us' (Letter 21, p. 823).

In the fourth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, written between 1665 and 1669³⁹, it is stated that 'since all our knowledge and the certainty which truly takes away all doubt depends

³⁶ Descartes (1996), p. 17-23.

³⁷ De Dijn (2009), p. 25-43

³⁸ Steenbakkers (2011), p. 343.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 347.

on a knowledge of God alone, and since without God nothing can be nor be conceived, and since we are in doubt about everything as long as we have no clear and distinct idea of God, it follows that our highest good and perfection depends on a knowledge of God alone' (TTP IV-3, p. 59). In other words, we are in need of salvation by means of acquiring knowledge of God, because otherwise we are lost in continuous doubt.

However, for the people who find it too difficult to have a clear knowledge of God, there is also another path to salvation. The simple, but true moral teachings of Scripture that can be understood by everyone. These can, Spinoza writes in chapter 7 of the TTP, likewise lead us to 'true salvation and blessedness', which consists in 'true contentment of mind' [*vera salus et beatitudo in vera animi acquiescentia consistit*] (TTP VII-17, p. 111).

Spinoza worked on his *Ethics* from the early 1660s till 1675⁴⁰. But during this period his most fundamental philosophical-religious teaching remained the same. The *Ethics* ends by naming 'all the remedies [*remedia*] for the emotions' (E-Vp20s, p. 373) that toss us about 'like the waves of the sea when driven by contrary winds, unsure of the outcome of our fate' (E-IIIp59s, p. 310). Again we find here the imagery of disease from which we need to be cured, something that is also described as a form of slavery from which we need to be freed. And again the ultimate cure (or the ultimate freedom) consists in 'the knowledge of God', which 'begets love for something immutable and eternal (...), which we can truly possess (...), and which cannot be defiled by any of the faults that are to be found in the common sort of love, but can continue to grow more and more (...) and engage the greatest part of the mind (...) and pervade it' (E-Vp21s, p. 373). Our blessedness consists then in 'the constant and eternal love toward God', which 'properly can be called spiritual contentment' [*animi acquiescentia*] (E-Vp36s, p. 379).

In the final two years of his life, Spinoza worked on the *Political Treatise*.⁴¹ He died on 21 February 1677, only 44 years old, before he could finish the work. Although the theme of 'religion' is less present in the TP, Spinoza also in this work states that 'the more a man loves God (...) the more he is free' (TTP III-22, p. 689).

To conclude, what I see in Spinoza's adult life – from his expulsion from the Jewish community onwards - is one persistent effort to formulate for himself true religion, and to convince others to embrace the knowledge and love of God as their highest good, because this is the path to salvation. This is, however, certainly not how others have perceived Spinoza's life works.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 351.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 355.

2.3. The Debate on Spinoza's Perceived Atheism

That Spinoza's rational, almost 'scientific' philosophy is at the very same time also a religion has always been a bitter pill to swallow for theists and atheists alike. Theists find many of the features of this philosophical religion – God is not a person, he did not create the universe out of nothing, he does not have a free will, and he is not interested in good and evil – to stand in outright opposition to what they believe revelation and upright tradition teaches as pertaining to the essence of 'religion'.⁴² Atheists, on the other hand, as they embrace the teachings that the theists abhor, shy away from taking seriously the role of the search for salvation, the importance of the knowledge of God, and the idea that man knows he is eternal. Therefore, it seems as if this one question – was Spinoza an atheist or a 'God-intoxicated man? – has to be debated over and over again.

Pantheismusstreit

In 1785 German's celebrated poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a letter to the polemical anti-Enlightenment writer, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Although Goethe and Jacobi were friends, they disagreed on the status of Spinoza. Jacobi started the *Pantheismusstreit* in Germany in the 1780's by publishing the accusation that Gottfried Ephraim Lessing⁴³ on his deathbed had confessed: 'Es gibt keine andere philosophie als die Philosophie des Spinoza'.⁴⁴ In his discussion with Lessing Jacobi 'argued that Spinoza's philosophy demonstrated that any attempt to proceed on the basis of reason alone inevitably resulted in a completely deterministic and fatalistic system that denied both the possibility of human freedom and the existence of a personal divinity'.⁴⁵

By exposing one of the most celebrated advocates of the Enlightenment as a hidden Spinozist, and in making Spinozism equivalent to atheist materialism (for Jacobi interpreted Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* as the idea that there is nothing except extended substance), Jacobi made clear where the whole Enlightenment would result in: materialist atheism. Goethe, however, strongly disagreed with his friend Jacobi on the interpretation of Spinoza, writing in his

⁴² Copleston (1985), p. 245 and p. 262-263.

⁴³ Gottfried Ephraim Lessing was the author of the play *Nathan, der Weise* (1779), celebrating a sense of inter-faith toleration and friendship. In the play the main character, Nathan, is based on Lessing's close friend, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn would a few years later, in his philosophical work, *Jerusalem* (1783) advocate religious tolerance. In the first part of *Jerusalem* Mendelssohn argued for freedom of religion. In the second part he plead for a transformation of the Jewish religion, abandoning the notion of rabbinic jurisdiction and submitting themselves to the authority of secular law. Mendelssohn is remembered as the main contributor to the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskala*.

⁴⁴ Jacobi (2000), p. 22. 'His [Jacobi's] battle cry, which he first directed at the defenders of Enlightenment rationalism and then at Kant and his successors, was that 'consistent philosophy is Spinozist, hence pantheist, fatalist and atheist'. The formula had the effect of bringing Spinoza to the centre of the philosophical discussion of the day.' Giovanni (2016).

⁴⁵ Schmidt (1996), p. 12.

letter: 'He [Spinoza] does not prove the existence of God, but rather that existence is God. And if others for that reason inveigh against him as *Atheum*, I would like to call him *theissimum* and even *christianissimum* and praise him for it'.⁴⁶

The great German philosophers, Kant and Hegel among them, felt obliged to react to the controversy that Jacobi had started. Their philosophical systems, in a very fundamental sense, can be seen as attempts to purify the philosophy of the Enlightenment from Spinoza, who, *hineininterpretierend*, was understood as the one who started the Enlightenment.⁴⁷ Not that they wanted to save the reputation of the Enlightenment from Spinoza's perceived atheism, for what influenced their ideas on Spinoza most was the account given of it by Herder, and Herder had quite convincingly refuted Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy as constituting mere atheism, demonstrating that Spinoza rather had to be considered 'an enthusiast' about God.⁴⁸ The philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel were therefore not really motivated by an attempt to overcome Spinozism as atheism, but rather by an attempt to overcome Spinozism as 'theocentrism', replacing it for philosophical systems in which not God, but man had to play the key role.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Goethe's letter to Jacobi, dated June 9, 1785. Cited in Prandhi, Julie D. 1993. *'Dare to be Happy!': A Study of Goethe's Ethics*. University Press of America, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Macherey (2011), p. 13, 14. 'For Hegel, everything begins with the realization that there is something exceptional and inescapable in Spinoza's philosophy. "Spinoza constitutes such a crucial point for modern philosophy that we might say in effect that there is a choice between Spinoza's philosophy and no philosophy at all *du hast entweder den Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie*" (...) For Hegel (...) Spinoza occupies the position of a precursor: something begins with him. (...) Spinoza's oeuvre is significant because it tends towards something that it does not achieve: to master its meaning is to follow this tendency beyond the limits that impede it, that is, to surpass it, by resolving its internal contradictions.'

⁴⁸ See: Lord (2010), p. 57, and Herder (1940), p. 95: 'It is plain on every page that he [Spinoza] is no atheist. For him the idea of God is the first and last, yes, I might even say the only idea of all, for on it he bases knowledge of the world and of nature, consciousness of self and of all things around him, his ethics and his politics. Without the idea of God, his mind has no power, not even to conceive of itself. (...) He places all mankind's perfection, virtue and blessedness in the knowledge and love of God. And that this is not some sort of mask which he has assumed, but rather his deepest feeling, is shown by his letters, yes, I might even say, by every part of his philosophical system, by every line of his writings. Spinoza may have erred in a thousand ways about the idea of God, but how readers of his works could ever say that he denied the idea of God and proved atheism, is incomprehensible to me.'

⁴⁹ Krop (2018), p. 5. Translated by me. '(...) the contradiction between Kant and Spinoza cannot be bridged. The reason is the incompatibility of their respective notions of freedom. The theocratic perspective of Spinoza opposes the idea of human autonomy, because in Kant this is the starting point from both a theoretical as well as a practical point of view.'

In the case of Hegel this move from philosophical theocentrism to philosophical anthropocentrism becomes clear from Hegel's attempt to oppose the idea of Spinoza as an atheist, by simultaneously promoting the interpretation of Spinoza as a Jew with an 'oriental intuition': 'In oriental thought, the principal relationship is as follows: the single substance is as such the true, and the individual himself is without value (...)' Hegel cited in Macherey (2011), p. 20. See also: Montag (2014), p. 92

How the Accusation Became a Sign of Admiration

In the twentieth century we find Spinoza scholars of name and fame declare that ‘the charge of atheism, constantly flung at him in the eighteenth century, has gone out of fashion’.⁵⁰ Well, not anymore, did Walter Eckstein respond in 1943, since this charge of atheism ‘constitutes the main content of a recently published book, *Spinoza and Religion* by Elmer E. Powell [published in 1941]. The thesis of this book is that Spinoza, an atheist at heart, (...) cloak[ed] his atheistic philosophy in the phraseology of religion’.⁵¹

How recognizable is this theory that Spinoza concealed his atheism, five years before Leo Strauss published *How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise* and sixty years before Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* appeared. Of course, the idea has deeper roots, since it was already put to the fore by the Cartesian philosopher, Lambertus van Velthuysen in 1671, one year after the anonymous publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Van Velthuysen claimed that the author of the TTP ‘prompts atheism by stealth (...) teaching sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments’. (Letter 42, p. 877, 878).⁵² This interpretation of Spinoza as an atheist in disguise has been revived in the twentieth century. As it was revived, it also slowly changed from an ‘accusation’ at the beginning of the twentieth century into a sign of ‘admiration’ at the start of the twenty-first as Spinoza became in the historical epos of Jonathan Israel the exemplar for all subsequent ‘Enlightenment Heroes’.⁵³

2.4. Spinoza’s Metaphysics: God or Nature

In order to see whether Spinoza should be called an atheist or a religious man, I will look at three dimensions of religion in Spinoza’s thought: namely the metaphysical dimension, the ethical dimension and the mystical dimension as they become manifest in his main work, the *Ethics*. It is not immediately clear how Spinoza’s metaphysics, laid out in *Ethics* 1, can be read as the worldview of an atheist. God, Spinoza writes, not merely exists, but *God exists necessarily*. God cannot be conceived other than existing, because he has existence as its essence. (E-1p11, p. 222).

⁵⁰Gebhardt (2009), p. 339: ‘Goethe hat Spinoza als den *philosophus theissimus* gepriesen, Schleiermacher bezeugt, daß er *voll Religion* gewesen, Novalis erkennt daß er *die Theologie zum Sitz aller Intelligenz gemacht*. Seitdem ist der religiöse Charakter der spinozanischen Philosophie von niemandem, auch ihren Bestreitern nicht, verkannt worden, und immer deutlicher hat sich die Unmöglichkeit erwiesen, die *Ethik* Spinozas mit der Erkenntnistheorie Descartes‘ oder der Methodologie Bacon’s unter ein und denselben Begriff der Philosophie schlechthin zu subsumieren.’

Eckstein (1943), p.153. I searched, but I couldn’t find ‘the short biography’, published by Pollock a ‘few years ago’ [meaning a few years before 1943] where Eckstein cites from. It could not have been Frederick Pollock’s magisterial *Spinoza, His Life and Philosophy*, because this biography was published by C. Kegan Paul & Co in 1880 and is almost 500 pages long.

⁵¹ Eckstein (1943), p.153.

⁵² In 3.2. the reader can find more on Van Velthuysen’s criticism and Spinoza’s reaction to it.

⁵³ Israel (2010), p. 944.

‘A philosopher who spends so much space and careful argument to establish the absurdity of any form of denial of God’s existence can hardly be accused of atheism with any justice’.⁵⁴ In order to interpret this as the view of an atheist one has to say that Spinoza’s God is not the real God. Spinoza only used the word ‘God’ as an appeasing term, while he actually has materialist Nature in mind.

Spinoza’s Reply to a Question of Oldenburg

In December 1675, Spinoza answered a request from Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the British Society with whom Spinoza had corresponded since 1661.⁵⁵ Oldenburg had asked him ‘to elucidate and moderate those passages in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which have proved a stumbling block to readers’. The passages that particularly worried readers, Oldenburg had written, are ‘those which appear to treat in an ambiguous way of God and Nature, which many people consider you have confused with each other’. (Letter 71, p. 940).

Spinoza replied:

‘I entertain an opinion on God and Nature⁵⁶ far different from that which modern Christians are wont to uphold. For I maintain that God is the immanent cause, as the phrase goes, of all things, and not the transitive cause.⁵⁷ All things, I say, are in God, and move in God, and this I affirm together with Paul⁵⁸ and perhaps together with all ancient philosophers⁵⁹, though expressed in a different way, and I would even venture to say, together with all the ancient Hebrews⁶⁰, as far as may be conjectures from certain traditions, though these have suffered much corruption. However, as to the view of certain people that the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* rests on the identification of God with nature (by the latter of which they understand a kind of mass or corporeal matter) they are quite mistaken’.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Harris (1973), p. 46.

⁵⁵ De Dijn (2008), p. 127: ‘Nature which is being equated with God is not the collection of all things, or the universe, but *Natura Naturans*, the ultimate cause which has produced *Natura Naturata* as its effect (E-IP29s).’

⁵⁶ They resumed their correspondence after a gap in their correspondence of about ten years, as there seems to have been no exchange of letters between 1665 and 1675.

⁵⁷ If God is the immanent cause of all things, everything is in God and remains in God, and everything flows naturally from the nature of God. If God is pictured as the transient cause of all things, God would be outside everything as the Creator of the universe.

⁵⁸ Spinoza might refer here to Paul’s Letter to the Colossians 1-17: ‘He Himself is before all things and in Him all things hold together’. Or to Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians 8-6 ‘yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist’.

⁵⁹ This is most clear for the Stoic tradition. ‘Stoicism presents the doctrine of an immanent divine, which is only a small step to the renowned Spinozistic assertion that God is nature.’ De Brabander (2007), p. 10. See also Aristotle (1998), Book 12, Chapters 6 till 10 where Aristotle argues that there must be an eternal substance which is the source of everything that exists and everything that thinks.

⁶⁰ In Judaism’s central prayer, the Schema it is stated that there is only one God. This is often interpreted as stating that there is in fact only one thing - that is, God. There is nothing besides God.

⁶¹ Letter 73, p. 942. Italics are not in the original.

Panentheism: Everything is in God

As Spinoza in this letter to Oldenburg explains, he understands himself as belonging and still standing in an old tradition. This is the tradition of monotheism: there is only one God. There is, however, a key difference between his conception of monotheism and the idea of this one God that most people have: God is not conceived by him as something external, something which is separated, and which stands apart from us. God is not the creator of the universe that has created everything out of nothing at a certain moment in time, because the whole of reality is contained in God and is continuously flowing out of God. The most important proposition of the *Ethics* for understanding Spinoza's idea of God is: 'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God'. (E-Ip15, p. 224).

This proposition states, first of all, that there cannot be anything outside God. We can imagine God as a force among forces, but then we do not possess a clear understanding of God. For, outside God there is nothing, as everything is in God. Of course, this can be easily misunderstood. It is not the case that God is in any part of reality in the sense that we could say 'God is this particular extended thing' or 'God is this particular idea', since these are merely modes of God. But these modes – these things and ideas – are 'in God' in the sense that they are natural things that exist and act, because of the power of God or Nature that makes them exist and act in a certain determinate way. Everything is in God means that God or Nature provides the ground for everything there is.

From this it can be deduced, secondly, that nothing can be without God, and that, thirdly, nothing can be conceived without God. All things we know from empirical experience are in God in the sense that everything that we know in this way exists in extended space. Likewise, all things we know from rational thought are conceived in God in the sense that all things are adequately understood by the infinite intellect of which an adequate idea of an individual human mind is but a part.

God's Necessary Existence

But why would God exist? God exists necessarily, because he is a substance. A substance does not depend on anything for its existence. Nothing can prevent God from existing. The presupposition of Spinoza's system seems to be that there needs to be a ground for everything there is.

This principle of sufficient reason⁶² is also implicit in the first axiom of Spinoza's system: 'All things that are, are either in themselves or in something else'. (E-Ia1). From this first axiom already follows logically that there are only two options. Either there is something in which all things are, but which is not in something else. Or there is an infinite regress: things are then in something else, and this something else is in its turn again in something else, and this is again in something else, and so forth and so on. Spinoza must have judged that the second option – an infinite regress – is absurd, because then there will not be a ground for the entire series to come into existence. This means that all things are either God, which is an independently existing substance, or they are modifications, that is, they are dependent on God for their existence.

The second axiom states: 'That which cannot be conceived through another thing must be conceived through itself'. (E-Ia2). This is an important presupposition of Spinoza: all things are understandable, because not only all extended things, but also all adequate ideas, are in God, either as attributes of substance or as modifications of substance. When we relate an idea to other finite modifications of substance we conceive something through another finite thing. We can also understand this finite thing as a modification of one of the attributes of substance, namely thought. In both cases we understand things through God. Without God we would not be able to understand anything. Whatever we understand are either modifications of God or the essence of God itself.

Understanding the Definition of God

God is formally defined by Spinoza as 'an absolute infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence'. (E-Id6, p. 217). Let me try to explain the different components of this definition – 'substance', 'infinite', 'attribute', 'essence', and 'eternal' – one by one. God is 'substance' means that God's existence does not depend on any other thing than itself: 'Existence belongs to the nature of substance'. (E-Id7, p. 219). God in this respect is unique. All things exist by virtue of causes that enable it to exist, and on which the existence of these things depends. But this is not the case with regard to God: his existence does not depend on any other thing than God himself. This is why Spinoza calls God a *causa sui*, a cause of itself.

Substance and Modes

According to Spinoza's metaphysics only two things exist: God as a reality that exists and is conceived in itself, and the modifications of God or all the things that are in God in the sense

⁶² Lin (2017)

that they exist and can be conceived through God.⁶³ (Spinoza also calls God or the one substance that exists in itself *Natura naturans* or ‘naturing nature’, and the modifications that exist in God *Natura naturata* or ‘natured nature’.) Everything in God or Nature happens according to necessary laws that come forth out of the nature or essence of God.

Now, the modifications of God’s attributes are again divided by Spinoza into three different kinds: there are infinite immediate modes, there are infinite mediate modes, and there are finite modes (E-IP21 till E-IP23p. 230-232).

Finite modes are easiest to understand: these are all the objects and all the ideas that we find in reality. Our bodies and our minds are both finite modifications of respectively the attribute of extension and the attribute of thought. The infinite immediate mode of the attribute of thought is the infinite intellect, the infinite immediate mode in the attribute of extension is motion and rest, and the infinite mediate modification in the attribute of extension is ‘the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains the same’. Spinoza strangely enough does not mention what would be the infinite mediate modification of the attribute of thought (Letter 64, p. 919).

Infinite, Attribute, Essence

A quite complex concept is that of the ‘infinite’.⁶⁴ In the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes the thing that is ‘absolutely infinite’ from the thing that is ‘infinite in its kind’ (E-I Definition 6 ex., p. 217). God is an ‘absolute infinite being’ in that there is absolutely nothing besides God, which of course also means that there is nothing that could limit God. This much is clear.

But it is unclear what Spinoza means writing that God as substance ‘contains infinite attributes’. Does he mean: a) that God has an infinite amount of attributes, meaning that there cannot be an attribute which doesn’t belong to God; b) that God contains attributes that are infinite in the sense that each attribute is infinite in its own kind?

I believe that both of these interpretations are true. In order to understand this, we first have to explain attributes. ‘By attribute I mean that which the [infinite] intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence’.⁶⁵ (E-I Definition 4, p. 217). Spinoza states that the human mind is

⁶³ Newlands (2018)

⁶⁴ Spinoza states in his letter to Lodewijk Meijer that ‘the infinite’ can be distinguished in four different ways, allowing for eight (!) different descriptions of what ‘infinite’ means: as that 1) which is infinite by virtue of its nature or 2) as that which is infinite by nature of its definition; as 3) that which is infinite by virtue of its essence or that 4) which is infinite by virtue of its cause; as that 5) which is infinite because it is unlimited or that 6) which is unlimited because it cannot be equated with any number; that 7) which is called unlimited by the intellect or that 8) which is called unlimited by the imagination. (Letter 12, p. 787)

⁶⁵ There are also two interpretations of attribute: in the subjective interpretation of Hegel and Wolfson attributes are understood by the human mind to be the essence of substance; in the objective interpretation attributes of Gueroult are

only capable of understanding two attributes of God (Letter 64, p. 918): thought and extension (E-IIp1 and E-IIp2, p. 245). Now, these two attributes – thought and extension – are infinite in their kind in that extension or space spreads out and knows of no limits, and the same applies to thought. It is impossible to understand an extended object which does not participate in the attribute extension. And, likewise, it is impossible to understand an adequate idea that does not participate in the attribute thought. Also, inadequate ideas of the imagination participate in the attribute thought, only they do so in a partial and mutilated way in the sense that they are partly directly participating in God and partly indirectly, in that some other thing that is in God makes them think this way. Because not all the ideas that are in the human mind participate directly in the infinite mind of God, it is possible for humans to be more or less united with God. If this were not the case, we would always experience the perfect unity with God.

Why are the attributes infinite in their kind? Because it is possible to understand things that are outside thought, which makes the attribute of thought not ‘absolutely infinite’. An extended object, for example, does not belong to thought, and in this way the attribute is limited. And, likewise, thoughts do not belong to extension, which makes these two attributes not absolutely infinite, but ‘infinite in their kind’. (E-Id2, p. 217).

In order to explain why each attribute expresses infinite essence, we first have to understand what Spinoza means by essence. This again is a difficult topic.⁶⁶ However, what is clear is that it belongs to the essence, that is, the nature of God, to exist. ‘God’s essence is his existence’ means that God cannot be adequately conceived as non-existing. But Spinoza also states: ‘God’s power is his very essence’. (E-Ip34, p. 238). God’s ‘essence’ not only equals ‘existence’, but also equals ‘power’.⁶⁷ Therefore, when Spinoza writes that God’s attributes express infinite essence, he means that God’s attributes express the absolutely infinite power, which makes that everything exists and also persists in its being.

understood *by the infinite mind of God* to be the essence of substance. I hold the objective interpretation to be true, because otherwise attributes would depend on a finite mode (namely the human mind). It seems to me that Spinoza must have held that a finite mode such as the human mind depends on the attribute of thought, and not the other way around. See: Van Bunge (2012) p. 22-23 and Shein (2013).

⁶⁶ Michael Della Rocca has written that Spinoza is hopelessly contradictory on the issue of whether there are shared essences or that each individual thing has its own essence: Della Rocca (2004), p. 132. Karolina Hübner has argued that we can solve the problem by stating that finite, particular things possess unique essences, whereas shared essences only exist in finite minds and are produced by the imagination: Hübner (2015), p. 58-88. Some have suggested two kinds of modal essences: actual essences that are unique to the individual mode and formal essences which can be shared by different individual things, making that “human nature” exists, but that there is also something like “the nature of hope” or “the nature of a circle”: Martin (2008), p. 489-509.

⁶⁷ An attribute is that which is conceived by the intellect ‘as constituting its essence’, and since Spinoza writes ‘God’s power is his very essence’ (E-Ip34) it seems logical that God’s power is also an attribute of God. But this is not the case. Just as that ‘existence’ is not an attribute of God, while ‘Existence [just as well] belongs to the nature of substance’ (E 1-7), and God is a substance. From this I conclude that Spinoza confines the meaning of attributes to aspects of God that are infinite in their kind, whereas ‘power’ and ‘existence’ are absolutely infinite.

The Power of God

No finite mode has to exist *necessarily*. Surely, it could be the case that triangles, fish, and men would not exist. That they, however, do exist is due to the fact that their existence and their essence flow with necessity from the nature of God. God, namely, has existence as his essence. This is the power of God: he necessarily exists and by his existence he makes it possible that all other things exist. 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways [*modis*] (that is, everything that can come within the scope of infinite intellect). (E-Ip16, p. 227).

All things, in so far as they exist, share in this power of God. They all have an essence that comes forth out of the essence of God. The essence of such particular things defines them positively in a determinate way. This is to say that all things do what their nature, which is the power of God, determines them to do. This, Spinoza calls the 'conatus' or the supreme law of nature, which makes all things endeavor to persist in their being. (E 1-24 till 29 and E 2-6 till 9; see also TP 2-2). It is the conatus which makes an individual that consists out of multiple parts act as if it were a unity, striving to persist in its being. The *conatus* is the central doctrine in connecting Spinoza's metaphysics to his psychology, his ethics and his politics.⁶⁸

Time and Eternity

God is eternal, because existence pertains to his essence. (E-I Definition 8, p. 217). God cannot not be. He is and will always be. Eternity in Spinoza's philosophy is not meant to describe a thing which endures forever, from the beginning of time till the end of time, because time itself is considered something which exists only in the imagination. Eternity should be conceived of as something which stands outside of time (E-I Definition 8, p. 217). We might visualize this if we understand time to be one of the four axes in a four-dimensional description of our universe. On this axis we can then put all the moments in time from the beginning till the end. But as we look at all these moments on the axis, they are not moving, they are an infinity of frozen moments which can all be conceived of at once. This, arguably, is how time would look from the standpoint of eternity.

A difficulty with Spinoza's understanding of time as something imaginary, and this image of eternity which I just sketched, is that 'motion and rest', according to Spinoza, are real as they are the infinite immediate mode of the attribute of extension. But how can something 'move' or 'rest'

⁶⁸ Matheron (1969), Part 1

if there is no time to measure it?⁶⁹ Maybe we can try to understand it by means of another metaphor: when watching a movie the observer experiences moving images. The person who is showing the movie knows, however, that the illusion of moving images is created by one spool of film. In every shot in the movie things are either moving quickly or more slowly or sometimes they even stand still. We can say then that ‘movement and rest’ are in the whole movie, as well as in all its parts, and still understand that the movie itself is in the spool that has remained the same. Just as the movie comes forth out of the spool, does the eternal immediate mode of ‘motion and rest’ come forth out of the attribute extension of eternal and infinite substance. And just as all shots in the movie can be considered as parts of the whole movie in which images move at different speed, so do all the finite modes in the infinite mediate mode of our universe move and rest. And so can the universe as a whole be conceived of as moving and resting in a fixed ratio.

There are in other words two levels on which we can understand ‘movement and rest’: on the level of the finite modes we are experiencing how all things move and rest in time as a series of durational causes and effects; on the level of the infinite modes we see movement and rest as something that is not durational, but as something that stands outside of time. For, we understand reality from the eternal, unchanging laws that cause the constant movement and rest of each thing, while the whole of reality remains the same.

Does Spinoza Have A Naturalist Conception of God?

To truly understand Spinoza’s system we need to arrive at ‘knowledge of God’. This knowledge cannot easily be substituted by ‘knowledge of nature’, without seriously altering the meaning of that word in the nowadays dominant, naturalistic understanding of it, because, as Spinoza himself explains in his letter to Oldenburg, the meaning of ‘Nature’ is not confined to material things alone. As ‘God is a thinking thing’ (E-IIp1, p. 245), also Nature must be a thinking thing. And as ‘God is eternal’ (E-Ip19, p. 230), also Nature should not be understood as a temporal succession of events, but as an eternal order, standing outside time, being wholly unaffected by it.

⁶⁹ See for this problem: Harris (1973), p. 101: ‘Can there be motion in any sense without lapse of time?’ Henri Krop has suggested to me to understand Spinoza’s use of ‘movement and rest’ not as something that belongs to Newtonian physics in which movement is understood in terms of both space and time, or in Kantian epistemology in which space and time are considered the necessary conditions for any kind of observation, but more in relation to mathematics. Just as a circle can be adequately conceived as ‘the space described by a line of which one point is fixed and the other moveable’ (Letter 60, p. 913) one can describe all relationships between finite things in the attribute of extension to move from one to the other in a mathematical, timeless way.

God or Nature not only changes the meaning of the word ‘God’, it just as well, and just as drastically, changes the meaning of the word ‘nature’.⁷⁰ As we – as finite modes – can only understand a small part of infinite and eternal attributes of substance, all that modern science can tell us about the universe will never give us God or Nature in its entirety. To grasp it, we should not use the methods of modern science, but we should come to an intellectual understanding of infinite substance itself.

Spinoza, writes Errol Harris, ‘regarded phenomenal nature, what appears of the world to us through sense-perception, as for the most part the product of illusion and error. He would have certainly not identified it with God or have deified it in its phenomenal form, although he would have maintained that it was a “part” of God misconceived by us through our ignorance of its true place in the whole’.⁷¹

Eric Schliesser has argued that the depiction of Spinoza ‘as a fellow-travelling mechanical philosopher and proto-scientific naturalist is misleading’.⁷² Spinoza seems to be way more interested in self-knowledge than in the laws of physics. The highest kind of knowledge allows us to understand ourselves as eternal. Knowledge of eternity is considered way more important than knowledge of ‘Measure, Time, and Number (...) [which] are nothing other than modes of thinking, or rather, modes of imagining’ (Letter 12, p. 789). Nature then, according to Spinoza and different from Galilei, is not written in the language of mathematics.

That there is something ‘teleological’ and misleading in the depiction of Spinoza as the first modern naturalist or materialist scientist also can be found in Spinoza’s ordering of the three kinds of knowledge. The lowest kind of knowledge is sense-perception. The highest kind of knowledge is not reason, but intuition.

2.5. Spinoza’s Philosophical-Ethical Religion

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses the word ‘religion’ [*religio*] nine times, twice in the sense of false religion [*religio falsa*], once in connection to a historically existing religion, and six times in the positive sense of a philosophical-ethical path to salvation.⁷³ Spinoza comes closest to a formal definition of religion as he writes: ‘Whatever we desire and do, whereof we are the cause insofar as we have the idea of God, that is, insofar as we know God, I refer [*refero*] to Religion [*religio*’]. (E-III7s1, p. 339). Spinoza doesn’t define religion here. He designates something with the name ‘religion’. In this way he seems to indicate that what he calls ‘religion’ is different from what we

⁷⁰ Pollock (1912), p. 331: ‘God has not been reduced to Nature, but Nature exalted to God.’

⁷¹ Harris (1997), p. 34-35.

⁷² Schliesser (2017), p. 155-190.

⁷³ Juffermans (2003), p. 165.

normally call religion. But why would he name it religion? The Straussian answer is that he did this in order to make his atheist philosophy look religious. Another possibility is that he wanted to indicate that his philosophy, although different from what we normally call religion, resembles religion in so many things that we can understand this philosophy as a kind of religion.

A Religion Which makes Us Autonomous, Reasonable and Free

The kind of religion that Spinoza advocates is one in which we ‘desire and do things’, because we have ‘knowledge of God’. How can we understand this? Well, when humans normally desire and do things, they desire and do them, because they are made to desire and do them by the fact that they are reacting to external things that are affecting their bodies (E-IVp16, p. 256; in combination with E-IVp4, p. 324).⁷⁴ However, when we understand that we are a part of God or Nature in which everything is determined by God’s eternal decrees or Nature’s necessary laws, and we understand that we are determined by God or Nature to try to persevere in our own being, but that we, at the same time, are being affected by many forces that make us react in ways that are not helpful in the endeavor to persevere in our own being, we arrive at another way of looking at ourselves and another way of living in the world.

To illustrate what Spinoza means here I will use an example coming from our modern times. If someone from watching a commercial gets the desire to buy the product, and as he goes on his way to buy the product, he is merely reacting to something external to him. If we live in this way, being constantly pushed around by external incentives, we are not the cause of ourselves. In that case we would also have a very inadequate idea of God, as we would only understand fragments of God in the things that our bodies stumble upon in this world. But when we come to ponder over these experiences, and the mind is not pushed to react to external incentives, but is ‘determined internally’, it ‘perceives things from the common order of nature’, as it is ‘regarding several things at the same time, to understand their agreement, their differences and their oppositions’, then ‘it understands things clearly and distinctly’. (E-IIp29s, p. 262).

When we understand things ‘clearly and distinctly’, we have adequate ideas, those are ideas that have ‘all the properties (...) of a true idea’ (E-IId4, p. 244), or, in other words, there is then nothing missing in our idea of something, because it is complete and perfect considered in itself, without reference to an external thing.⁷⁵ Now, the most complete and most perfect idea is the

⁷⁴ It is a mistake, according to Spinoza, to think that we can desire something, because we judge it to be good. Rather, it is the other way around: we call something good, because we desire it. (E 3-9s, p. 284) Hence, we cannot be the cause of our desires by knowing right from wrong. When Spinoza speaks about ‘being the cause of oneself’ he refers to something else than knowledge of good and evil.

⁷⁵ Klever (1996b), p. 97-99

idea of God, because everything is in God. As we increase our knowledge of God, and as our understanding becomes more and more complete and perfect, we become more and more the causes of our desires and acts. We no longer see an isolated event. Instead, we understand it as a part of a chain of events that is produced by the laws of nature. Or we understand it as determined by the power of God to be and act in a specific way. It is this understanding of all particular things in the context of the whole which creates peace of mind, reasonableness and love. We arrive at another state of mind in which we desire and act in a way that helps us and the people in our societies to persevere in our own being. This is what Spinoza ‘refers to’ as religion.

Spinoza’s description of religion seems even more peculiar to us than it did to his contemporaries, because it conflicts with the way in which religion often is depicted. In the popular narrative of the “new atheists” religious people are supposed to not ‘dare to think for themselves’.⁷⁶ Religious people are thought of as ‘heteronomous’ and ‘unfree’. But Spinoza’s philosophical religion is the opposite of all of that as he makes clear that this religion makes us reasonable, autonomous and free.

A Religion Focused On What We Desire and Do

Spinoza’s religion is also peculiar for a second reason. In the conversations on religion I often have, for example, I find that people most often consider religion to consist out of a bunch of beliefs. A religious person in this regularly defended point of view is supposed to hold certain opinions about God, the afterlife, the human soul and a whole bunch of other things. Depending on the content of these kinds of beliefs my conversational partners think they can decide whether they can call a person ‘religious’ or not. But although Spinoza’s religion comes forth out of ‘knowledge of God, this religion shows itself not in having certain opinions, but in our intentions and in our acts. This is why Juffermans calls Spinoza’s philosophical religion a philosophical-ethical path to salvation. Spinoza’s religion is philosophical because the religion is about arriving at a deeper understanding – coming to the knowledge of God. But this religion is also ethical, because this understanding can only be called religious if it also shapes our desires and affects the way in which we act in the world.

Spinoza’s description of religion as what we desire and do insofar as we know God is the first *scholium* to the following proposition: ‘The good which every man who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind, and all the more as he acquires a greater knowledge of God’. (E-IVp37, p. 339) To be religious, in other words, has in Spinoza’s thinking

⁷⁶ This is of course not how Kant meant this phrase. See: Kant (1996). Cliteur has, for example, been defending this position that religion makes us less autonomous. See 7.1 on secularism for a description of his view.

something to do with pursuing virtue and with desiring something good, not only for yourself, but for everyone.⁷⁷

How can the knowledge of God make us more virtuous? The basis of virtue is ‘the very conatus to preserve one’s own being’ (E-IVp18s, p. 330). However, we can only preserve our own being by means of many things outside ourselves. Think of things such as air, water, food and the like. Since we are most of all dependent on other human beings, nothing helps us better in persisting in our own being than to unite with other people in a society (E-IVp18s, p. 331). Pursuing virtue means then to seek social harmony, and in order to obtain social harmony justice is needed as well as charity.

Unfortunately obtaining social harmony and political stability is often impossible as we are the victims of passive emotions. Many of these emotions drive us apart. The desire for uncertain things causes jealousy, ambition, anger, hatred, and the like. These emotions make us enemies. The more we come to be led by reason, that is, the more we obtain knowledge of God, the better we can control the passions and the better are we able to achieve social harmony.

The religious man, writes Spinoza, desires the good he wants for himself also for everyone else. Notice how this makes the religious man differ from the vulgar man who desires things like wealth, sex, glory, and fame for himself alone, and certainly not for everyone else. These uncertain desires also make people ambitious, envious, and hateful towards others who they imagine to possess what they want for themselves. In this way these desires towards uncertain goods are creating strife between men, and creating disharmony in society.

But the desire of the religious man, which is to know and to love God, is not a scarce good whose value diminishes as more people share in it. Therefore, this desire does not create strife, but peace.

A Religion that Advises Us To Do Well and Be Glad

The virtuous man ‘who lives by the guidance of reason endeavors as far as he can to repay with love or nobility another’s hatred, anger, contempt, etc. toward himself’. (E-IVp46, p. 345). Such a man ‘hates nobody, is angry with nobody, envies nobody, is indignant with nobody, despises nobody, and is in no way prone to pride’. (E 4-73s, p. 357-358). These points ‘concern the true way of life and religion’, and mean that the virtuous or truly religious person, conquers hatred by returning love and that he is guided by reason to seek for others the good that he seeks for himself. He has ‘this foremost in mind, that everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature, and therefore whatever he thinks of as injurious or bad, and also whatever seems impious,

⁷⁷ Juffermans (2003), p. 196-202.

horrible, unjust, and base arises from his conceiving things in a disturbed, fragmented and confused way. For this reason, his prime endeavor is to conceive of things as they are in themselves, and to remove obstacles to true knowledge, such as hatred, anger, envy, derision, pride, and similar emotions that we have noted. And so, he endeavors, as far as he can, to do well and to be glad [*bene agere et laetari*].

This is the shortest possible summary of Spinoza's ethical teaching: 'Do Well & Be Glad'. His philosophy wants to attain this goal and help people to become more virtuous, which also means that they become more religious, because true religion shows itself internally in peace of mind and externally in the acts of people. We become more virtuous and religious by increasing our knowledge of God. The highest kind of knowledge is to come to the realization that our finite minds participate in God's infinite intellect and are therefore eternal. (E-Vp23, p. 374)⁷⁸

A Religion of Understanding

Spinoza emphasizes in the *Ethics* that it is first and foremost necessary to *know thyself*. Once we understand what kind of being we are, that is, once we understand how we by nature are determined to function in a particular way, we can also understand how we can function in the best way. In his description of what kind of functional being we are, Spinoza remains close to the tradition. In Aristotle we find the twofold definition of man as a thinking animal and as a social animal. As a consequence thereof, there are two kinds of life which are really fulfilling for the human being: the contemplative life in which man has perfected his theoretical reasoning capacities, and the active life in which man has perfected his practical reasoning capacities. Likewise for Spinoza, our happiness consists in two things: in perfecting our understanding and in perfecting our bonds with our fellow men.

Virtue is described by him as nothing but strength of mind [*fortitudo*], which is the mind exercising understanding. The only thing which is truly good is to understand things. (E-IVp27, p. 334). This main virtue is subdivided by Spinoza into courage [*animositas*] and nobility [*generositas*]. Courage he defines as 'the desire whereby every individual endeavors to preserve his own being according to the dictates of reason alone'. Nobility he defines as 'the desire whereby every individual, according to the dictates of reason alone, endeavors to assist others and make friends with them'. (E-IIIp59s, p. 310). The best life, for the ancients as well as for Spinoza, is a life led by reason. It is reason that shows that humans have to perfect themselves as thinking beings and as social beings.

⁷⁸ Juffermans (2003), p. 239-241

Juffermans has outlined how Spinoza's description of virtue at the end of *Ethics* 3 is mirrored in his description of religion in E-IVp37s2.⁷⁹ Just as strength of mind falls apart in acting rationally out of one's own self-interest and acting rationally out of care for the other person, so does religion subdivide in 'piety' [*pietas*] on the one hand, which is 'the desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason' and sense of honor [*honestas*] on the other hand, which consists out of 'the desire to establish friendships with others, a desire which characterizes the man who lives by the guidance of reason'. (E-IVp37s1, p. 339). Religion and ethics both lead us then to the cultivation of what the Aristotle would have called theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom.

A Religion that Focuses on This Life

The final two propositions of the *Ethics* make clear that for Spinoza the knowledge of our own eternity is not the most important thing. His focus lies on salvation *in this present life*. 'Even if we did not know that our mind is eternal, we would still regard as being of prime importance piety and religion (...)' (E-Vp41, p. 381). In its most important sense 'salvation' means being liberated from the slavery of the passions in order to lead a life in which we love God and our neighbor. In other words, a life in which we 'do well and be glad', not because we are expecting a reward for this behavior in an afterlife, but because we come to realize that the reward of virtue is virtue itself. (E-Vp42, p. 382)

Spinoza's primary endeavor is to show people the way to an ethical and religious life. But to obtain this life is not a matter of the will. For, there is no such thing as a free will. It is a matter of arriving at a new and higher understanding of the world. It is by means of the *knowledge* of God that we can find salvation.

2.6. Salvation Through Knowledge of God in the *Ethics*

Because Spinoza spent his life in the pursuit of something he called 'salvation', which he hoped to achieve by means of something he called 'knowledge of God' one could argue that in fact the burden of proof lies with those who claim that Spinoza was not a religious man, but an atheist. However, as can be argued against this point of view, it is not enough merely to cite Spinoza's words, as his habit was to give existing words another meaning.⁸⁰ In order to understand the meaning of Spinoza's words, we have to reconstruct them within the context of his philosophical system. This is what I will try to do in this section as I will analyze the meaning of the words

⁷⁹ Juffermans (2003), p. 196-202

⁸⁰ Jongeneelen (2001), p. 11-128

‘salvation’ and ‘knowledge of God’. I will discuss these things mainly by following the overall structure of Spinoza’s main work, the *Ethics*, but sometimes also the discussion will turn to parts of the *Theological-Political Treatise* that deal with the same subject.

Salvation

Salvation in Spinoza’s philosophy is described in three different ways. It can be used in a purely physical sense of ‘living securely and in good health’. In order to achieve this goal you most of all need good government and good laws. It can be used in an emotional-political sense in controlling the passions, ‘that is to acquire the habit of virtue’. (TTP III-5, p. 45) (This is also political, because controlling the passions leads to both *peace* of mind as well as to *peace* in the state.) And it can be used intellectually as the intellectual love of God.

Salvation in This Life and Eternal Salvation

What exactly Spinoza meant by salvation remains a matter of considerable debate in the secondary literature.⁸¹ That Spinoza changes – one could also say ‘naturalizes’ – the meaning of the word ‘salvation’ in order to include also a meaning of it which simply has to do with leading a happy life on this earth, can be used as an argument for the ones who hold that he was a ‘closet-atheist’.

The Need For Salvation

However, one could also say that most (contemporary) atheists seem to deny what Spinoza affirms here, namely that humans are in need of salvation.⁸² This follows from Spinoza’s account of our normal life which is, although it is (most often) described in detached terms, quite gloomy.⁸³ By nature we are all inclined to superstition, which means that we are forced by nature

⁸¹ The main problem here is that Spinoza seems to give two different accounts of salvation: one by means of adequate understanding in the *Ethics* 5-36S and one in the TTP XIV and 15 by means of obedience alone. The debate in the secondary literature centers therefore on the question whether these two accounts can be reconciled. Sylvain Zac has maintained that philosophy or the natural theology described in the *Ethics* is the true path to salvation: Zac (1965), p. 230. Rice (1994) agrees with Alexandre Matheron and Douglas den Uyl that the obedience of the *Treatise* is compatible, though a lesser kind of obedience than the one in the *Ethics*. See on this same issue also: Matheron (1971), Chapter 3. Michael Rosenthal and Douglas den Uyl make a distinction between salvation and blessedness. Den Uyl believes that ‘[p]hilosophy is the road to blessedness, religion to salvation’, Den Uyl (1999), p. 152. Rosenthal: ‘The purpose of outer religion [a religion based on ceremonial laws] is to achieve salvation (rather than blessedness), which is nothing other than the good of the body secured through secure and healthy living.’ Rosenthal (2001), p. 50. Angela Roothaan, on the other hand, maintains that salvation by means of obedience alone is not of a lesser kind than obedience by means of the third kind of knowledge. Both equally lead to salvation or blessedness. Roothaan (1996), p. 54.

⁸² In 2009 there were 30 buses driving around London for a month carrying the slogan, meant to propagate a peaceful and uplifting atheist message: ‘There’s probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life’.

⁸³ See E-IIIp59s and TTP Preface for a distant yet gloomy account of the natural state of man as being the slave of the passions.

to desire uncertain goods, which will have the effect on us that our feelings will fluctuate, making us oscillate all the time between happiness and sadness, hope and fear and pride and self-abasement. This in its turn will make us search desperately for some good omens that can give us false assurance, making us more superstitious and less accountable to reason. The emotions that badger us in this way, make us enemies of our own true interest and of each other, ‘for by the laws of appetite, everyone is drawn in different directions’ (I*TP XVI-5, p. 198). Passions such as envy, hatred and the desire to take revenge make our societies very unstable. If we want to live in peace and if we desire not to be constantly swayed around by our passions – which we want, because we desire to be preserved in our own being – then we also want to be saved.

The Path to Salvation

The path to salvation, outlined in the *Ethics*, is one which starts with God or metaphysics (part 1), goes on to deal with the human being and human knowledge, or philosophical anthropology and epistemology (part 2), proceeds by explaining the emotions or human psychology (part 3), then describes ethics or the knowledge of good and evil (part 4) to end in a description of our freedom, salvation or blessedness (part 5). The procedure that Spinoza follows is telling, in that it makes him more of a classic than a modern. Descartes is often called the first modern philosopher, because his philosophy starts with an epistemological question (How can we know for sure?) and not with a metaphysical question (What kind of things exist?). Spinoza’s philosophy, however, is more traditional in this regard that it starts with a metaphysical account and then moves on to discuss epistemology.

In Spinoza’s epistemology the three kinds of knowledge occupy a central place.⁸⁴ These three kinds of knowledge are clearly connected to the three different ways in which we exist: 1) as finite modes that are being affected by other finite modes (it is then that we know things by the first kind of knowledge or the imagination); 2) as finite modes that are part of infinite modes (it is then that we understand things by means of the second kind of knowledge or reason); and 3) as modifications of divine attributes (it is then that we can immediately grasp things by means of the third kind of knowledge or the intuition).

The First Kind of Knowledge

Let me describe the three kinds of knowledge one by one with somewhat more care and attention in order to better understand how *knowledge* of God leads to salvation and because they

⁸⁴ Spinoza described the three kinds of knowledge with some minor differences in TIE 19, p. 7; ST 2-1, p. 62-63 and E-IIp40s2, p. 267.

are so central for understanding Spinoza's philosophical system. Most important for understanding Spinoza's philosophy, I find, is his theory of the imagination. This is why I have taken some more time to describe it.

Affections of the Body

In the *Ethics* Spinoza starts to discuss the first of the three kinds of knowledge - the imagination - in a series of propositions that deal with the human body. The first and most important of these propositions, dedicated to the body is: 'The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body – i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else'. (E IIp13, p. 251) The human mind is the idea of the body. On the lowest level this means that the mind registers the ways in which the body is being affected by other bodies. As the mind not only registers, but also memorizes these affections, it becomes a kind of knowledge in which one can understand new experiences in light of the old experiences. In associating a new thing that the body encounters with an old thing that the body has encountered in the past, the mind actually regards as present something that does no longer exist.

But it is not only things from the past that we imagine to still be here. It are all these things that make our minds understand reality as if it were in a continuous flux, passing moments in time. We imagine things when we look back in time, and we imagine things when we understand them to be in the here and now, and we imagine things to be in the future, as 'nobody doubts that time, too, is a product of the imagination' (E-IIp44s, p. 269). To obtain adequate knowledge means to conceive things to stand outside time, corresponding to eternal laws of nature or existing and acting out of the eternal nature of that particular thing. Spinoza writes: 'to retain the usual terminology, we will assign the word "images" [*imagines*] to those affections of the human body the ideas of which set forth external bodies as if they were present to us (...). And when the mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines [*imagines*]. (E-IIp17s, p. 257)

Incomplete Representations

With introducing the imagination Spinoza starts his analysis of error. However, he immediately notes that the imagination in itself contains no error. The imagination is not untrue, but incomplete. An example that Spinoza gives to illustrate this point is that we think that we have free will, because we experience ourselves as making certain choices in life. There is nothing wrong with this knowledge in itself, but what is lacking from it are the causes that make us decide this or that. Another example which Spinoza gives is that the sun appears to us to be not too big and not too far away. There is nothing wrong with this knowledge in itself as this is how the sun

presents itself to our senses, but what is missing is the knowledge that the sun actually is very far away from us and extremely large, and what is also missing is the knowledge which reveals the ways in which the senses work (E-IIp35s, p. 264). The first kind of knowledge is characterized, not by its falsity, but by its incompleteness.

Associations

To understand something by means of the imagination is to associate certain words or certain images with other words and other images. Spinoza gives the example of a Roman who, from hearing the sound 'ponum', immediately thinks of an apple, just because his body has been trained to associate the sound of this word with that particular thing. Similarly the mind of a soldier, who sees the tracks of a horse in the sand, will think of a rider and from there to war and so on, whereas a farmer, seeing the same tracks, will think of a plough and from there to a piece of land and so forth (E-IIp18s, p. 258). That the mind is able to do this, is not a weakness, but a strength. Spinoza differentiates between imaginings that are conducive our well-being and those who are not. The imagination becomes a problem when the mind cannot experience any rest any more, but is continuously triggered to think now about this, and then about that, without any order and without control over ourselves. But the imagination is fine if we put it to use to reflect on the things that we want to reflect on. In other words: if the imagination is triggered by external incentives, the mind is unfree, but if the imagination depends solely on its own nature, that is, if it is determined from within, then the mind is free (E-IIp17s, p. 257).

The Relevance of the First kind of Knowledge

By means of the imagination alone we cannot arrive at an adequate knowledge of God. We cannot form a picture of God, because God is not a mode or a thing in the universe, but the force that makes all things exist and function in the ways that they do (E-IIp47s, p. 271). It seems then that the first kind of knowledge cannot help us to attain the kind of blessedness that is hinted at in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, and that is being described in the *Short Treatise* and in the *Ethics*, because through the imagination we can only understand fragments of God, but we cannot experience the full fusion of the mind with God. However, this does not mean that we should equate knowing God with the first kind of knowledge to superstition. We can understand God solely with the first kind of knowledge without being superstitious.

The imagination is often evaluated as a negative force, because Spinoza writes that the imagination gives us only fragmentary and confused ideas, and is therefore 'the only source of falsity' (E-IIp41, p. 268), that the imagination stands at the root of superstitious beliefs (E-I

Appendix, p. 239), that the imagination makes us suffer from the passions (E-IIIp1 proof, p. 279), and that last, but not least, the imagination makes man turn against man, because we only differ in nature in so far as we are subject to passive emotions (E-IVp32 and 33, p. 336). In this way it seems as if the imagination is indeed something we should try to get rid of if we want to persist in our own being.⁸⁵

But the imagination is not entirely negative according to Spinoza. The imagination, in the sense of the things that we have learned from experience, has enabled Spinoza to ‘know almost everything that is of practical use in life’. (TIE 20, p. 7) And it is the imagination in the sense of creating a reality by means of words and images, that has enabled the prophets ‘to perceive much beyond the limits of the intellect. For far more ideas can be formed from words and images than from the principles and concepts alone on which all our natural knowledge is built’. (TTP I-28p. 26)

Spinoza’s evaluation of the imagination is nuanced. Several scholars have paid attention to the warnings about the first kind of knowledge that Spinoza has given us, but in this process they have neglected or downplayed the importance of those passages in which Spinoza endorses the imagination.⁸⁶ Without the imagination we would not be as creative as we can be now, envisioning other realities than the one that exists at the moment. (E-IIp17s, p. 257) Without the imagination Spinoza indicates we would not be able to do the simplest things, such as recognizing our friends or knowing the way to our house or to know how to cross the street.⁸⁷ Without shared imaginations, it would be impossible to have people live together in peace and harmony.⁸⁸ Therefore we have to understand that it is certainly not the case that Spinoza wants to rid us of the imagination. It has been Cornelis de Deugd who has stressed as one of the first ‘the significance of Spinoza’s first kind of knowledge’, and it is De Deugd who writes about the role of the imagination in the *Theological Political Treatise*: ‘The imagination proves to be the power by which the people learned *everything* needful for the attainment by righteousness and for leading the just and pious life – everything to be known of man and God, life and death’.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ de Deugd (1924), p. 148.

⁸⁶ Steven B. Smith writes: ‘The purpose of the *Treatise* is the therapeutic one of liberating reason from superstition or, what comes to the same thing, the power of the imagination’, Smith (1997), p. 30. We see a less clear expression of the same sentiment in Jonathan Israel’s description of the liberation of man by means of reason. ‘Social cohesion and political stability become possible only where men live according to the guidance of “reason”.’ Man in Israel’s account of Spinoza can clearly not be liberated by means of the imagination: Israel (2001), p. 260.

⁸⁷ ‘Without the imagination’, Piet Steenbakkers writes in his lemma on *imaginatio*, ‘the mind would be deprived of all knowledge of its body and of external things. Though inadequate, this knowledge is essential for interacting with the world around us and thus forms part of our conatus, our essential striving to maintain our existence’: Van Bunge et al (2011), p. 231.

⁸⁸ Gatens & Lloyd. (1999). James. (2010), p. 250-67

⁸⁹ de Deugd (1924), p. 139.

The first kind of knowledge, as we have seen, can be used in a way that is conducive to our well-being and in a way that is not conducive to it. The imagination makes us unfree when it consists in a continuous series of chaotic reactions to external incentives, creating unrest in the soul. But the imagination can also make us free if it is used in conformity with our own nature, that is when it is used to find peace and the love of God. This certainly also applies to the knowledge of God that we can acquire by means of the first kind of knowledge. Sure enough, this knowledge is incomplete and can be used to make us superstitious in the sense that we come to fear God as we want him to provide us with the uncertain things that we love, and as we want him to love us over all others. But the imagined idea of God as a perfect and all powerful *external* force can also be used in order that we come to accept our fates and become more just and charitable. (We will return to the subject how salvation by means of an imagined idea of God is possible in our discussion of Biblically revealed faith in the next chapter.)

Salvation By Means of the First kind of Knowledge

Most of the debates on how Spinoza exactly understood salvation center around the account of salvation given in the *Ethics*, and the question to what degree this account is compatible with ‘the salvation of the ignorant’ which is described in the TTP.⁹⁰ In so far it is acknowledged that the imagination can help us to reach salvation, it is often assumed that this liberating force is only being outlined in the TTP. But the importance of the imagination for reaching salvation is not only found in the TTP, but also in the fourth and in the final part of the *Ethics*. The imagination can help us to picture a model [*exemplar*] of human nature that we strive to. (E-IV, Preface, p. 322). This model is described by Spinoza in the propositions about ‘the free man’ (E-IV67 till 72, p. 355-357); this free man does not exist in reality, but only in the imagination, which can be a help as we memorize the rules of conduct that this model of human nature teaches us, ‘and to commit them to memory and continually apply them to particular situations that are frequently encountered in life, so that our casual thinking is thoroughly permeated by them and they are always ready to hand’. (E-IVp10s, p. 369) We can, in other words, make use of the mechanisms of the imagination in order to associate hateful behavior with a loving response, and this will help us to react in a different way.

Universal Notions

Spinoza describes the first kind of knowledge as a kind of knowledge, which provides us with ‘universal notions’. By connecting different memories to each other, we arrive at general

⁹⁰ Matheron. (1971).

conclusions. The universal notions we obtain in this way, or by means of symbols such as ‘man’, ‘horse’, ‘dog’ are not adequate ideas, because these notions are by necessity incomplete as the mind is not able to understand all the differences between individual men, between individual horses, and between individual dogs. That this is the case can be noticed in the fact that different philosophers have named different things to belong to the essence of ‘man’, depending on their personal experiences. ‘For example, those who have more often regarded with admiration the stature of men will understand by the word “man” an animal of upright stature, while those who are wont to regard a different aspect will form a different common image of man, such as that man is a laughing animal, a featherless biped, or a rational animal’. (E-p40s1 and s2, p. 266 till p. 268) Not only the philosophers, but also the prophets likewise formed a universal notion of God by means of the imagination, and it is for that reason that they have understood God in very different ways. (I*TP II-7 till 2-11, p. 30-32)

We see here that Spinoza turns against the tradition as he states that both the philosophers as well as the prophets did not provide us with adequate knowledge of God, in so far as they failed to make the distinction between universal notions which are derived from the imagination, and from universal notions which are derived from reason.

The Second Kind of Knowledge

We can also form universal notions by means of ‘common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things’. Spinoza calls this kind of knowledge “reason” and “knowledge of the second kind” (E-IIp40s2, p. 267).

Common Notions

In order to understand common notions we have to go back to Spinoza’s statement that the object which constitutes the human mind is the idea of the body. The body, however, consists out of many parts, and is a composite individual. For example a human body consist out of a heart and a system of blood circulation, a digestive system and a system to process food, sense organs and a system to process sensory input, bones and muscles and a system which allows us to move around and more. These systems consist again out of different components. Spinoza writes: ‘nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body’s capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do, without being determined by mind, solely from the laws of its nature insofar as it is considered as corporeal. For nobody as yet knows the structure of the body so accurately as to explain all its functions (...)’ (E-IIIp2, p. 280).

The body is a very complex, composite individual. But this composite individual can also be understood as to – together with other composite individuals – make up a larger body. And why stop there? As we continue to understand extended reality in this way, ‘we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts – that is, all the constituent bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole’ (E-IIp13 Lemma7s, p. 255).

The same idea is expressed in Spinoza’s letter to Oldenburg in which he gives the example of ‘the tiny worm in the blood’. As this worm can conceive the smallest particles in the blood (chyle, lympe, etc.) ‘that worm would be living in the blood in the same way as we in our part of the universe, and it would regard each individual particle of the blood as a whole, not a part, and it would have no idea as to how all the parts are controlled by the overall nature of the blood and compelled to mutual adaptation as the overall nature of the blood requires, so to agree with one another in a definite way. (...) Now all the bodies in Nature can and should be conceived in the same way as we have now conceived the blood; for all bodies are surrounded by others and are reciprocally determined to exist and to act in a fixed determinate way, the same ratio of motion to rest preserved in them taken all together. (...)’ (Letter 32, p. 849).

The mind comes to form a more adequate idea of the body as it understands this body to be a part of the whole of extended nature.⁹¹ Spinoza writes in his letter to Schuller that this one individual body in which all bodies are but a part (or ‘the face of the whole universe’) is a mediate, infinite modification of the attribute of extension, while ‘motion and rest’ is called an immediate infinite modification of this same attribute of God (Letter 64, p. 919).

Now that we have a somewhat more adequate understanding of the body we can see better what Spinoza means when he states that we can arrive at the second kind of knowledge through common notions ‘that are common to all things and are equally in the part as in the whole’ (E-IIp37, p. 265), and are also ‘common to all men’ (E-IIp38c, p. 265). What is common in all things is ‘that all bodies agree in certain respects’ (E-IIp13L2, p. 252): ‘all bodies agree in this: in that they involve the conception of one and the same attribute (.), and also in that they move in varying speeds, and may be absolutely in motion or absolutely in rest.’ (E-IIp13, Lemma 2, Proof, p.252).

Salvation by Means of Knowledge of the Second Kind

Let us now return to the question at hand: how does reason help us to the knowledge of God? By means of reason we understand God’s infinite modes, his eternal decrees that rule over all

⁹¹ This infinitely stretched out individual body to which our human bodies belong, should not be confused with God. God cannot be equated with *natura naturata*, but only with *natura naturans*.

matter and over all thought as universal and eternal laws. This kind of knowledge of God helps us to understand ourselves and the emotions that enslave us and stand in the way of our true happiness, as we obtain an adequate understanding of these things (E-Vp4s, p. 366). We find then how the power of reason alone can provide us with the remedies against the sickness to which Spinoza was already searching a cure in his youth work. (E-Vp20s, p. 372).

The Third Kind of Knowledge

The most perfect knowledge of God is intuitive as the *Short Treatise* and the *Ethics* tell. This third kind of knowledge ‘proceeds from an adequate idea⁹² of the formal essence⁹³ of certain attributes⁹⁴ of God⁹⁵ to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things’. (E-IIp40 scholium 2)

⁹² ‘By an adequate idea’, Spinoza writes, ‘I mean an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties, that is, intrinsic characteristics, of a true idea’, (E-II def. 4). An adequate idea needs to be differentiated from a true idea, Spinoza explains in Letter 60 to Tschirnhaus: ‘the word “true” has regard only to the agreement of the idea with its object, whereas the word “adequate” has regard to the nature of the idea in itself. A true idea is then an idea which describes something existing in reality, whereas an adequate idea is an idea in which all the different components of the idea perfectly fit together, without there being necessarily an existing thing that corresponds with this idea. Spinoza does not give this example, but one might think of the idea of a bridge inside the mind of an architect. This idea of the bridge is true when the bridge in the mind of the architect corresponds to an actually existing bridge. This idea is adequate when all the different elements of the idea fit perfectly together, creating a bridge that could possibly exist in reality.’

⁹³ In the TIE Spinoza explains the distinction between ‘formal essence’ and ‘objective essence’ in the following way: ‘A true idea (for we do have a true idea) is something different from its object. A circle is one thing, the idea of a circle another. For the idea of a circle is not something having a circumference and a center, as is a circle, nor is the idea of a body itself a body. And since it is something different from its object, it will also be something intelligible through itself. That is, in respect of its formal essence the idea can be the object of another objective essence, which in turn, regarded in itself, will also be something real and intelligible, and so on indefinitely’ (TIE, 33). According to Spinoza, ‘the objective essence’ of a circle is the material circle itself, whereas ‘the formal essence’ of a circle is the adequate and true idea of a circle. When Spinoza writes that the third kind of knowledge proceeds from ‘the formal essence of certain attributes of God’, he simply means that this kind of knowledge comes forth out of ‘the adequate and true idea of certain attributes of God’.

⁹⁴ ‘By attribute I mean that which the intellect perceives of substance constituting its essence’ (E-I def. 4). Still, essence here means something different from the definition of E-II def. 2, because this definition of essence pertains only to modes or things. An attribute is *not* that without which substance can neither be nor be perceived. This would be absurd, since: ‘By substance I mean that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed’ (E 1 def. 3). Rather, ‘whatever can be perceived by infinite intellect as constituting the essence of substance pertains entirely to the one sole substance. Consequently, thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that’ (E-IIp7s, p. 247). Some of the difficulties surrounding the understanding Spinoza’s concept of attributes are described in Shein (2013)

⁹⁵ God is defined by Spinoza as ‘an absolutely infinite being, that is, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence’ (E-I def. 6). Spinoza hastens to add that we need to distinguish between that what is ‘absolutely infinite’ and that which is ‘infinite in its kind’ (E-I def. 6 Explication). Extension and thought are both infinite in their kinds, that is, the time-space continuum is infinite in its kind, and also the mental space in which all thoughts can exist is infinite in its kind. They are not absolutely infinite because there are things which are not included in extension (namely all thoughts) and there are things that are not included in thought (namely all things that make up physical space). God, however is ‘absolutely infinite’ in the sense that there is nothing outside of God. ‘Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God’ (E-Ip15).

Knowledge of the Particular Thing

The highest kind of knowledge for Spinoza is not knowledge of the whole, but the knowledge of the particular thing, understood in the light of the knowledge of the whole. In a certain sense therefore one could say that the third kind of knowledge brings us back to the first kind of knowledge, after this has undergone a transformation thanks to the second kind of knowledge. After we have understood that our bodies are a part of one infinite body in which everything happens according to the same universal and eternal laws, we come to see the power of the eternal and infinite God in every finite thing.

The second kind of knowledge, in as far as it is based on common notions, fails to make us understand the essences of particular things.⁹⁶ In other, naturalized words, the second kind of knowledge gives us knowledge of the universal laws of nature, but it fails to give us knowledge of the particular nature that each thing has. The immediate insight which the intuition provides us with is to grasp the nature of individual things such as the chemical formula of mercury, the definition of a circle or the essence of jealousy.⁹⁷ It is this particular essence, definition or nature of these things which determines how all these individual things persevere in their being (the *conatus*).

Intuition as Experience

To understand something with the third kind of knowledge is not only connected to the notion of ‘immediacy’, but also to a certain kind of ‘experience’ of things that ‘leads to the highest possible contentment of mind’. (E-Vp27, p. 375). Spinoza introduces the third kind of knowledge in the fifth part by first stating that ‘we feel and experience that we are eternal’. ‘So although we have no recollection of having existed before the body, we nevertheless sense that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under a form of eternity, is eternal, and that this aspect of its existence cannot be defined by time, that is, cannot be explicated through duration’ (E-Vp23s, p. 174).

The third kind of knowledge brings us back to the first kind of knowledge. It makes us *experience* the finite modes once again, but now in a completely transformed way, as all things are known to come forth out of an infinite and eternal being. In this experience, time disappears as we understand things not as being in a continuous flux, but as we come to understand these things without relation to time, in the same way as God sees them (E-Vp29 and E-Vp30, p. 176).

⁹⁶ Soyarslan (2016), p. 27–54.

⁹⁷ Van Buuren (2016), p. 131.

Jon Wetlesen writes that: ‘the main difference between the second and the third kinds of cognition is an existential difference.(...) It is not sufficient that he [the wise man] cognizes the general contents of definitions, axioms, propositions, etc. which explain how the essence of man is internally determined by the essence of God: he must feel it and experience it in his own body and mind, so to speak, starting from a direct intuition of his own dependence on God. (...) this means that the person must first experience the concrete duration of his own body from the viewpoint of eternity’.⁹⁸

Understanding the Structure of the Ethics

Understanding the three kinds of knowledge and the idea of salvation through knowledge of God makes Spinoza’s main work intelligible. The last three parts of the *Ethics* are structured around the three kinds of knowledge. But it is not the case that the third part is about the imagination, the fourth part about reason, and the fifth part about intuition.

The Passions

Spinoza devotes most attention to the first kind of knowledge, which is the subject of the third as well as the fourth part. Let me explain this. The third part deals with ‘the origin and nature of the emotions’. Emotions are by Spinoza divided into passive emotions and active emotions (E-IIIp58, p. 309). We are passive in so far as the mind has inadequate ideas; we are active in so far as we have adequate ideas (E-IIIp1, p. 279). As all inadequate ideas belong to the first kind of knowledge (E-IIp41 Proof, p. 268), and as the third part of the *Ethics* is almost entirely devoted to the origin and nature of the passive emotions to which we are subjected⁹⁹, we can say that the third part is about the emotional effects of the first kind of knowledge.

Our Bondage

From the title of the fourth part of the *Ethics* – ‘On Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions’ – one can see that Spinoza intended also the fourth part to be about the grip that the passive emotions, which come forth out of the imagination, have on us. It is slightly confusing, however, that Spinoza, from the scholium of proposition 18 onwards, starts to discuss what ‘reason prescribes for us’ (E-IVp18s, p. 330). Therefore, it seems as if only 18 of the 73 propositions of the fourth part deal with the power of the passions or the imagination; whereas the other propositions are devoted to what follows from the dictates of reason. Those supposedly are the things that we understand by using reason.

⁹⁸ Wetlesen (1979), p. 63.

⁹⁹ Only proposition 58, the final proposition of the third part, is dedicated to the active emotions.

However, the ideal life that prescriptive reason shows us still belongs to the imagination. Prescriptive reason tells us what is good and what is bad in the sense that it makes clear what is most useful to us. But to think of the world in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is to still be in the grip of the imagination. These words, according to Spinoza, do not describe anything real in the world, but only the way in which our bodies are being affected. If the mind thinks that the body is being affected in a way that helps the body to persist in its own being, it experiences pleasure, which the mind calls ‘good’. And when the mind thinks that the body is being affected in a way which decreases its ability to persist in its own being, then it feels pain, which it names ‘bad’ (E 4-8, p. 326 and E-IIIp11, p. 285,285).

Knowledge of good and evil alone does not empower us. Spinoza cites Ovid approvingly: ‘I see the better course, and I approve it, but pursue the worse course’. Ecclesiastes, traditionally attributed to King Solomon, likewise hints at this inability of us to do the good, only from understanding it, as the Bible states: ‘He who increaseth knowledge increases sorrow’. (E-IVp17s, p.330). Traditionally, this problem is understood as something that can be overcome by an effort of the will. But free will is an illusion, according to Spinoza, and therefore this traditional solution disappears.

It does, for this reason, make sense that the fourth part of the *Ethics* in its entirety is devoted to our powerlessness and slavery, as the knowledge of how we should live only underlines the desperateness of our situation. The only remedy against the grip that the passions have on us which is offered in the fourth part, is to counter a passion by a stronger, opposite passion, for example, to keep someone’s desire in check by instilling fear of punishment in him (E-IVp7, p. 325 and E IVp37s2, p. 341). It is obvious that this person, in this way, still remains the slave of the passions.

Our Freedom & Salvation

The fifth part finally discusses the power of reason, which is the power that comes forth out of the second and the third kinds of knowledge. By understanding the causes of the emotions, we become active instead of passive, as we exchange inadequate ideas for adequate ones. The most important knowledge with regard to the good life that we seek is therefore self-knowledge, understanding how we, human beings, as a part of nature, are affected by the other modes of nature, and how all this happens according to universal and eternal laws which can be adequately understood by us (See: E-III, Preface, p. 277-278).

Spinoza’s remedy against our illness is to counter passive emotions by stronger, active emotions, i.e., the pleasure which comes forth out of understanding. Since love is defined as

‘pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause’ (E-III Ex.6, p. 312), and since we couldn’t understand anything without God being its cause, we come then to the love of God. However, as we understand by means of the third kind of knowledge that God is not an external cause, but an internal cause, this knowledge and love of God by means of the third kind of knowledge cannot be destroyed by any external thing. In this eternal knowledge and love of God we find our true salvation and blessedness.

Spinoza’s Mysticism

Many commentators have argued that, although the end of the *Ethics* is difficult to follow¹⁰⁰, we should definitely not interpret this section of Spinoza’s work as endorsing a kind of mystical knowledge.¹⁰¹ ‘[O]ne must not let oneself be misled to the use of phrases such as ‘intellectual knowledge of God’ into interpreting Spinoza as though he were a religious mystic like Eckhart. (...) The notion that the philosophy of Spinoza was a philosophy of religious mysticism arises only if one persists in neglecting the definitions of terms like ‘God’ and ‘love’ and the light shed on those definitions by the system as a whole’.¹⁰²

That Spinoza’s conception of God is quite distinct from how the religious tradition has seen God is a truism, but Spinoza’s point is – again and again – to show that his new interpretation of God is capable of explaining almost all the phenomena which, according to tradition, follow from God and from the understanding of God. His account of how we feel that we are eternal resembles the accounts of mystics who have claimed to have had direct experiences of God.

What is mysticism? The Islamic Sufi and philosopher Al-Ghazali, says,

‘I knew that the complete mystic “way” includes both intellectual belief and practical activity; the latter consists in getting rid of the obstacles in the self and in stripping off its base characteristics and vicious morals, so that the heart may attain to freedom of what is not God and to constant recollection of him. (...) [W]hat is most distinctive of mysticism is something which cannot be apprehended by study, but only by immediate experience (*dhawq*- literally “tasting”), by ecstasy and by a moral change. What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions and *being*

¹⁰⁰ The analytic philosopher Jonathan Bennett has called the end of the *Ethics* for this reason a ‘disaster’: ‘I [Bennett] don’t think that the final three doctrines [the mind’s eternity, intuitive knowledge, and the intellectual love of God] can be rescued. The only attempts at complete salvage that I have encountered have been unintelligible to me and poorly related to what Spinoza actually wrote. (...) After three centuries of failure to profit from it, the time has come to admit that this part of the *Ethics* has nothing to teach us and is pretty certainly worthless.’ Bennett (1984), p. 357.

¹⁰¹ Knol, (2009) p. 116. Knol names Ferdinand Alqu  , Wim Klever and Steven Nadler as scholars who have criticized this idea of Spinoza as a mystic.

¹⁰² Copleston (1963), p. 263.

healthy and satisfied. What a difference between being acquainted with the definition of drunkenness (...) and being drunk!’¹⁰³

What is striking in the description of Ghazali is that mysticism comes forth out of intellectual knowledge, just as the third kind of knowledge is only made possible once we have obtained the second kind of knowledge; that this knowledge furthermore frees us from certain wrong ideas about God, such as the ones which Spinoza describes in the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, and that this new understanding is coupled to a change in moral attitude, and that last, but not least, this kind of knowledge is described by both Ghazali as Spinoza as an immediate knowing.

In case one finds the quotation of an Islamic Sufi from the eleventh and twelfth century a bit too exotic for the interpretation of Spinoza, here is Jan Knol, a Dutch reformed minister, who after his retirement spent sixteen years (from 2000 till his death in 2016) in understanding and spreading the ideas of Spinoza. Knol has made the point that if we understand mysticism to be ‘something mysterious, secretive, vague, exaggerated, woolly and sentimental’ then surely Spinoza was not a mystic. But if we understand mysticism to contain certain characteristics such as the following that Jan Knol has described, then Spinoza could very well be called a mystic:

1. ‘The universe is being experienced as a unity.
2. The world is experienced as something that is not all about man.
3. There is a reconciliation with evil as it is placed within the context of the whole of reality.
4. One doesn’t compare and doesn’t judge, but accepts everything as it is and not as one wants things to be.
5. Conflicts and polarities are being resolved.
6. The world is accepted as perfect.
7. Tensions and the fear of death disappear. (...)’¹⁰⁴

The knowledge that the propositions of the *Ethics* are meant to transmit, can make someone aware that there is something way more important than our individual persons, something on which we completely depend in everything. This knowledge also makes it possible to change our lives and to behave differently towards each other – less hateful and more loving.

The knowledge of God is not to be found in words. For words are mere ‘corporeal motions far removed from the concept of thought’ (E-IIp49s, p. 274). The reader of the *Ethics* – or of any book – has to make the necessary leap from reading the words on the page to the understanding of the ideas with the mind. ‘For everything we understand clearly and distinctly is dictated to us

¹⁰³ Ghazzālī (2005), p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ Knol (2009), p. 113-114.

(...) not in words, but in a much more excellent manner which agrees very well with the nature of the mind, as every man who has experienced intellectual certainty has undoubtedly felt within himself. (TTP I-4, p. 14).

And this is a second reason why Spinoza's philosophical religion is a kind of mysticism: he urges us to not forget that words, mathematics and logic are mere means or tools that help us to arrive at a certain destination that lies beyond the limits of what can adequately be expressed, because it can only be experienced.

In the end Spinoza's paradoxical message is not to trust any messages. Spinoza's theory of language in this respect seems to express a universal theme, which could be called a kind of mysticism, a theme which is echoing through the entire history of philosophy, from Plato's *Seventh Letter* and his *Phaedrus* to Spinoza's friend Pieter Balling who urges his readers in *The Light Upon the Candlestick* to turn away from words and to use their own intellect: 'We direct, thee, then, to within thyself'.¹⁰⁵ And from there to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who writes in one of the last propositions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly'.¹⁰⁶

The image of the ladder Wittgenstein might have gotten from Spinoza, who writes: '[W]e see that reasoning is not a principal thing in us, but only like a staircase by which we can climb up to the desired place, or like a good genius which, without any falsity or deception, brings us tidings of the highest good in order thereby stimulate us to pursue it, and to become united with it; which union is our supreme happiness and bliss'. (ST 2-26, p. 100).

2.7. Spinoza's Defense Against the Charge of Atheism

One of the three stated reasons Spinoza had for writing the *Theological-Political Treatise* is: 'The opinion of me held by the common people, who constantly accuse me of atheism. I am driven to avert this accusation as far as I can'.¹⁰⁷ Spinoza therefore is quite upset by Van Velthuysen's

¹⁰⁵ Balling (1963)

¹⁰⁶ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated from the German by C.K. Ogden. Hypertext of the Ogden bilingual edition Retrieved from: <http://www.kfs.org/jonathan/witt/tlph.html>. Proposition 6.54.

¹⁰⁷ Letter 30, p. 844

opinion that the author of the *Treatise* was teaching atheism, which he tries to prove by bringing up the following three arguments to which Spinoza reacts.¹⁰⁸

Van Velthuysen's first argument is that Spinoza's fatalism makes morality impossible. Spinoza rejects free will, not only in man, but also in God. Everything happens from necessity. This means that man cannot help it if he does good or evil. Man cannot choose to follow the laws of God. The idea, central to Christianity, that God rewards the righteous, while he punishes the wicked becomes senseless in a universe in which even God is subjected to fate. 'And so we can see that the author makes no mention in his writing of the use of prayer, just as he makes no mention of life or death or of any reward or punishment which must be allotted to men by the judge of the universe'.¹⁰⁹ The fear of punishment for trespassing the law and the hope of reward for obeying the law disappear in Spinoza's account, and that makes it atheistic.

Van Velthuysen's second argument is that Spinoza uses religion in a Machiavellian fashion, as a mere tool to establish political stability. Spinoza needs religion to keep the masses in check. 'For in the case of men of the common sort their minds are so constituted and so ill-trained that they can be urged to the practice of virtue only by arguments deriving from the nature of law, and from fear of punishment and hope of reward. But men of true judgment understand that there is no truth or force underlying such arguments'.¹¹⁰ Spinoza, according to van Velthuysen, doesn't believe in the truth of religious dogmas, but he thinks that they serve an important political function, because they enable simple people to obey and lead a pious life. This is the position of an atheist.

Thirdly, Van velthuysen maintains that since Spinoza holds that religion can only be judged in terms of people's 'works', not by their content, Spinoza cannot say any more that Islam is a false religion and Christianity a true one. All religions can in principle inspire people to love their neighbor. This makes clear that Spinoza cannot believe that Christianity is somehow special. '(...) the author has not left himself a single argument that Mahomet was not a true prophet. For the Turks, too, in obedience to the command of their prophet, cultivate those moral virtues about which there is no disagreement among the nations, and, according to the author's teaching, it is not uncommon to God, in the case of other nations to whom he has not imparted the oracles given to the Jews and Christians, to lead them by other revelations to the path of reason and obedience'.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ For the three points and the reaction of Spinoza I lean heavily on the work done by Rosenthal (2012), p. 814-815

¹⁰⁹ Letter 42, p. 870

¹¹⁰ Letter 42, p. 870

¹¹¹ Letter 42, p. 877

Spinoza Against Van Velthuysen: 'I Am Not An Atheist'

Spinoza reacts to Van Velthuysen – in a letter addressed to Jacob Ostens, that probably is written in 1671, and that is known to us as letter 43 – to these three points:

First Spinoza points out that Van Velthuysen is wrong in believing that Spinoza's philosophy is doing away with rewarding good and punishing evil. God is free in the sense that he is forced by his own nature alone and not by anything outside of this nature – because there is nothing outside God. This 'inevitable necessity of things does not do away with either divine or human laws. For moral precepts, whether or not they receive the form of law from God himself, are still divine and salutary. And whether the good that follows from virtue and love of God is bestowed on us by God as a judge, or whether it emanates from the necessity of divine nature, it will not on that account be more or less desirable'.¹¹² We don't need to believe in God's last judgment in order to be inspired to act morally. What Van Velthuysen, according to Spinoza fails to understand is that the virtue of understanding is in fact enough of a reward for those who understand, while the vice of stupidity is the punishment for the stupid.

Spinoza does not deal directly with Van Velthuysen's second accusation that his theological-political teaching is Machiavellian (and therefore atheistic), as Rosenthal also notes. Rosenthal accordingly mentions the influential Straussian reading as one that completely depends on the idea that Spinoza is a Machiavellian.¹¹³ What Rosenthal doesn't mention is that Spinoza is different from Machiavelli in that he doesn't believe that people need to be ruled by fear.¹¹⁴ 'True religion is about the love of God. It doesn't matter whether this love is arrived by means of the philosophical religion or through Biblically revealed faith, in both ways we should not love God out of fear.'¹¹⁵ Therefore, Van Velthuysen is mistaken – not in making the distinction between the philosophical religion of the few on the one hand and the universal faith for the multitude on the other hand, but in believing the Machiavellian point of view that the multitude is better guided by

¹¹² Letter 43, p. 879-880

¹¹³ Rosenthal offers his own solution to the apparent contractions in the TTP that Strauss notes: Rosenthal (2003a). I will deal with these 'contradictions' in chapter 5.

¹¹⁴ Machiavelli (2016), p. 40: 'Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.' Spinoza TTP V-8 and 9, p. 73: 'human nature does not allow itself to be absolutely compelled (...) no one has maintained a violent regime for long (...) For while men are acting from fear alone, they are doing what they do not at all want to do (...) [Moses] took great care to ensure that the people would do its duty willingly and not through fear.' Spinoza TP V-6, p. 700: 'For a free people is led more by hope than by fear'.

¹¹⁵ 'The sum of the divine law therefore and its highest precepts is to love God as the highest good, that is, as we have already said, not to love him from fear or punishment of penalty, nor for love of some other thing by which we desire to be pleased' (TTP IV-5, p. 60).

fear than by love. For Spinoza, this is also what distinguishes the religious person: that he acts out of the love of God.

Spinoza reacts to Van Velthuysen's third point by stating that he is wrong that there is no argument to prove that Mahomet is an impostor. Since 'he [Mahomet] completely abolishes the freedom which is granted by that universal religion, revealed by the natural and prophetic light (...)'.¹¹⁶ In other words, we can judge a religion by looking how much freedom it allows its citizens to think and speak freely about their own convictions. Furthermore, Spinoza is willing to accept that if the Muslims 'worship God by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbor, I believe that they possess the spirit of Christ and are saved, whatever convictions they may hold in their ignorance regarding Mahomet and oracles'.

Piety and true religion can only be detected in someone's deeds, not in the beliefs he holds. Atheists, Spinoza writes, 'are usually fond of honors and riches which I have always despised'. This is consistent with the way Spinoza defines faith in the *Treatise* where Spinoza comments on John's first Epistle in which it is said that we should love our neighbor, because God is love.¹¹⁷ This passage is followed immediately with Spinoza quoting the text from the first letter of John that also figures as the motto of the *Treatise* on the opening page.¹¹⁸ What Spinoza is saying here is that he is not an atheist, because you can judge this from his works, in the way he lives, in that he loves his fellow human being, just as the apostle John writes. Spinoza's defense against the charge of atheism is therefore in the first place, that he is not an atheist because he tries to fulfill the obligations of Biblical morality to be just and charitable.

True religion shows itself, according to Spinoza, when people believe that God must be acknowledged as the highest good and loved, while atheists or people who renounce all religion do not hold these beliefs. Spinoza rejects the accusation of atheism by arguing that he does not deny the existence of God as the first cause of everything there is. On the contrary, he claims that our highest good exists in the knowledge of and the love for this God: 'Does that man, pray, renounce all religion who declares that God must be acknowledged as the highest good, and that he must be loved in a free spirit?'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Letter 43, p. 881.

¹¹⁷ 'From this it follows that we can only make the judgement whether someone is faithful or unfaithful from his works. If his works are good, he is one of the 'faithful', even if he differs from the other 'faithful' in matters of belief.' (TTP XIV-7, p. 181)

¹¹⁸ The First letter of John 4-12 and 13: 'if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and He abides in us, because he has given us of his spirit'.

¹¹⁹ Spinoza refers in the TTP, among others to Paul's letter to the Romans (1-20), because he states there that God is known by 'the things he has made.' In other words, natural theology is endorsed by Paul and thus by the Bible (TTP IV-12, p. 67).

Applying Spinoza's own Criteria of Atheism to Himself

If we would try for a moment not to consider Spinoza's defense against the accusation that he is an atheist immediately as a strategic maneuver, but as the position he honestly held, we would first of all have to take a look at Spinoza's life itself. We see then the life of someone who didn't care for luxury¹²⁰ or reputation¹²¹, but only lived in order to come to a clearer understanding and love of God, trying to have as many people as possible to share in this understanding. He tried to live then according to the rules of his own philosophical religion, and this is something that has struck commentators throughout the ages.¹²²

¹²⁰ In the oldest biography of Spinoza, by Jean Macimilian Lucas, it is stressed over and over again that Spinoza did not care for riches and that he also did not desire to be admired by people. Both Lucas as well as Colerus mention in their biographies that Simon Joosten de Vries, a prosperous merchant, offered to support Spinoza financially with a yearly allowance of two thousand florins, so that he would be able to live more comfortably. However, Spinoza refused. According to Colerus he did so because he was afraid that the thought of his indebtedness to someone else would distract him from his philosophical work. Spinoza also did not want to inherit De Vries's money. He convinced him to not put himself but his own brother in his testament. Steven Nadler (1999), p. 261-262.

¹²¹ In Letter 48 Spinoza politely refused the offer to have an honourable position at the University of Heidelberg, a proposition offered in Letter 47, p. 886 and 887.

¹²² Bayle (2011), p. 90: 'Those who were acquainted with him, and the peasants of the villages where he had lived in retirement for some time, all agree in saying that he was sociable, affable, honest, obliging, and of a well-ordered morality.' Russell (1945), p. 569: 'Spinoza (1634-77) is the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed him, but ethically he is supreme.'