God-intoxicated man

The philosopher who questioned the existence of the world

CLARE CARLISLE AND YITZHAK Y. MELAMED

TEN YEARS AGO, a manuscript of the Ethics, Benedict de Spinoza's philosophical masterpiece, was discovered in the archives of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The manuscript, labelled Tractatus theologiae and annotated on the last page by an official of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In the autumn of 2011 Johns Hopkins University, and the Charlotte Bloomberg Professor of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University, and is the author of Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and thought, 2013

Latin text established by consulting the Vatican manuscript alongside Latin and Dutch editions of the work published shortly after Spinoza's death. In their editorial introduction, Pierre-François Moreau and Piet Steenbakkers describe how the Vatican manuscript was hastily copied from Spinoza's original sometime in 1674 or 1675 for E. W. von Tschirnhaus, Spinoza's philosophical disciple and the sharpest of his correspondents, who travelled from Amsterdam to Rome in 1677. It consists in a packet of ten small paper-wrapped cahiers "made to measure" for this journey - not only in a handy pocket-sized format, but with a view to disguising its controversial contents: "sans couvertures, sans titre, sans nom d'auteur, sans table des matières".

Spinoza died before the Vatican banned his Ethics, but he had anticipated its getting into trouble. In July 1675 - not long after Tschirnhaus's copy was produced - the forty-three-year-old philosopher wrote to his longstanding correspondent Henry Oldenburg, the first Secretary of the Royal Society, announcing his plan to publish a five-part treatise. Spinoza had been working on his metaphysical opus since the early 1660s, and now he set off from his quiet home in the Hague to Amsterdam to get the work to press. In the autumn of 1675, however, he wrote again to Oldenburg, this time with news that "certain Theologians" and "stupid Cartesians" were racing to denounce his views to the Dutch authorities, since "a rumour was spread everywhere that a certain book of mine about God was in the press, and that in it I tried to show that there is no God". Spinoza, whose personal motto was "Caution", decided to delay publication.

Oldenburg wrote back from London in November, seeking a clarification of his friend's religious position. He was especially worried about Spinoza's view of the relationship between God and Nature: "a great many people think you confuse these two things". In his reply, Spinoza confessed that "I favour an opinion concerning God and Nature far different from the one Modern Christians usually defend". Yet he aligned himself with older religious traditions, both Jewish and Christian: "That all things are in God and move in God, I affirm with Paul, and... with all the ancient Hebrews, as far as we can conjecture from certain traditions, corrupted as they have been in many ways". Spinoza's reference to "certain traditions" may allude to Kabbalistic literature in which the identification of God and Nature is ubiquitous. In pre-modern Hebrew, the literal meaning of Kabbalah is "tradition", and in the seventeenth century the Kabbalah was widely regarded as an ancient wisdom of the mysteries of being, whose true significance had been corrupted over the ages.

Deus sive Natura, "God or Nature", is probably the most quoted phrase in the Ethics, and it has often been taken as a slogan for Spinozism. Over the centuries the fame (and infamy) of this striking phrase has diverted many readers' attention from affinities between Spinoza's doctrine of God and traditional theologies. As Oldenburg's anxious enquiries suggest, for most of his Christian contemporaries Deus sive Natura was a horrifying idea, akin to atheism.

Yet readers have to wait until Part Four of the Ethics, titled "On Human Bondage, or the power of the passions", to encounter the phrase Deus sive Natura. Part One of the book, "On God", defines God as an absolutely infinite substance. From this Spinoza infers other features of God, such as simplicity, uniqueness, eternity. He also argues that everything else that exists is a "mode" (or modification) of substance, and thus constitutionally and asymmetrically dependent on God. Substance is in se, "in itself" and caused by itself, modes are in alio, "in another". Spinoza's concepts of substance and mode lay the ground for his claim, a few pages into the Ethics, that "Whatever is, is in God".

Despite many readings of the Ethics which make the phrase Deus sive Natura a cornerstone of Spinoza's metaphysical system, to say that everything, including the world as a whole, is in God - a position now labelled "pantheism" - is quite different from claiming that the world is God, the view usually known as "panentheism". Spinoza's panentheism leaves room for the idea that God exceeds, or transcends, the sum total of all things (or "modes"). The God of the Ethics certainly transcends what we normally call "nature". This is inseparable from the fact that Spinoza's God transcends human knowledge and experience. God's essence is expressed through an infinity of attributes (or distinct ways of being), and we have access to just two of these attributes: thought and extension.

So Spinoza was not misrepresenting his own metaphysics when he told Henry Oldenburg that he "affirmed with Paul", along with Hebrew writers, that all things "are in God and move in God" - a reference to Acts 17:28. He was also correct in pointing out that his view differed from the teaching of "modern Christians". After Spinoza was banned by his Jewish community as a young man, he lived all his life in the Dutch Republic, religiously dominated by the Calvinist theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church. While Calvin was also fond of quoting Acts 17:28 to accentuate human dependence on an omnipresent God, his anthropomorphic descriptions of God's willful character make it difficult to avoid imagining a divine Ruler and Judge presiding above the world.

The separation of God from nature that Spinoza, in 1675, recognized as distinctively "modern" was sharpened in eighteenth-century desis, and found striking expression in the image, popularized in William Paley's Natural Theology (1802), of a divine designer whose relation to the natural world was analogous to a watchmaker's relation to a watch. We can now recognize this anthropomorphic deity as the God of those modern atheists who caricature religious belief as a wish-fulfilment fantasy about a cosmic father-figure. Looked at this way, deist and
atheist challenges to traditional religion, far from following Spinoza's footsteps are decidedly hostile to his system. If the seventeenth-century churches had been more attentive to the Ethics they might have better fortified their God against the ravages of secularism. But neither the Pietists, nor the Huguenots, nor Catholic polemics, like denounced Spinoza as an atheist.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, a new assessment of Spinoza's religiosity had emerged. The Dutch theologian Salomon Maimon—admired by Kant as “the sharpest and deepest of his critics” - came to Spinoza after studying the Talmud, the Kabbalah and Maimonides. In 1792 Maimon published in Leiden, the first anti-Jewish anti-Spanish pamphlet, shocked readers with the claim that “it is hard to fathom how Spinoza's system could have been made out to be atheistic, since the two systems are diametrically opposed. The atheist system denies the existence of God; Spinoza's denies the existence of the world. Thus, Spinoza's system should really be called acosmism.”

Since the Ethics repeatedly affirmed that whatever exists, exists in God, Maimon was right to emphasize Spinoza's commitment to the existence of God, and to the non-existence of anything that is not (in) God. Moreover, the word “in”, Maimon argued that for Spinoza, whatever is, is simply God.

In his lectures on the history of philosophy delivered in Berlin during the 1820s, G. W. F. Hegel adopted verbal irony in regarding Spinoza as an acosmist. Hegel also repeated Maimon's tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Leibnizian rationalists, such as Christian Wolff and Moses Mendelssohn, merely reconciled acosmism and anthropocentrism when they insisted on the existence of both God and finite substances.

Maimon helped inspire a new German Spinozism, which found memorable expression in Novallis’s description of Spinoza as a “God-intoxicated man.” Suddenly the damned atheist became the hero of a radical Romantic religiosity, which could claim to be more religious than theistic. Or analytically, as well as the Latin Opera. Their editorial task was formidable: Spinoza is a sparse, sometimes elliptical writer, and a single noun or verb can carry great metaphysical weight. Spinoza's system, modelled on Euclid’s Elements, the Ethics presents an intricate deductive argument full of cross-references between its numbered definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations and scholia. Daudigny was particularly high of precision Spinoza sought to achieve by his geometrical method, small transcription errors could reverberate through this conceptual edifice.

The controversy surrounding Spinoza’s first editors - Lodewijk Johannes Bouwmeester, Jeriel Jelles, Jan Rieuwerts and Jan Glazemaker - made a momentous contribution to our history of philosophy. Their doctrine of Spinoza’s in particular: above all the Ethics, Leibniz, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel would all have thought differently. This picturesque circle of friends were the forebears of successive generations of editors and translators who have toiled on the Ethics. Since no manuscript of the work survived, philosophers and philologists in later centuries had to navigate through a labyrinth of translations, editions and commentaries. And since in 1657, Spinoza’s first editor, Lodewijk Johannes Bouwmeester, Johannes Leibniz, Johannes Rieuwerts, and in 1656; and 1656; - and since then OUP has published significant books on Spinoza's metaphysics by the North American philosophers Sam Newlands and Martin Lin, as well as existing in philosophy without북한: Don Garrett and Michael Della Rocca assembled twenty-five scholars to produce the Oxford Handbook of Spinoza, much of it devoted to metaphysical issues arising from the Ethics, and since then OUP has published significant books on Spinoza's metaphysics by the North American philosophers Sam Newlands and Martin Lin, as well as .

The recent explosion of Spinoza studies - and of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology inspired by Spinoza has resulted in a deep reorientation in analytic as well as continental philosophy. In many ways, Spinoza is now replacing Kant and Descartes both as the compass and the watershed of modern thought.

Spinoza, since his willingness to follow reason wherever it led him. Deliberately remaining outside both Jewish and Christian communities, Spinoza gained a remarkably perspicacious insight into taking his arguments to the point of the weighing no authority beyond the power of his arguments, he presented his reasoning in the most transparent manner, as if daring his opponents to challenge the validity of his inference. While philosophical boldness and precision underwrite the intellectual power of Spinozism, the religious element of his thought remains crucial. For centuries the Ethics has been religiously question-


MAY 15, 2020