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PANTHEISM CONTROVERSY

*Valtteri Viljanen*

Rarely, if ever, has a thinker’s reputation transformed as abruptly as Spinoza’s did in the 1780s. The so-called pantheism controversy (*Pantheismusstreit*) of 1785 turned him apparently almost overnight from a villain to a hero. The controversy involved three German intellectual luminaries: G.E. Lessing (1729–1781), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), and F.H. Jacobi (1743–1819). In its broad outlines, the story goes as follows. Lessing and Mendelssohn were regarded as among the most revered figures of the German Enlightenment; after Lessing died, Mendelssohn planned to write a book on his departed friend. However, in 1783, Jacobi—an unremitting critic of Enlightenment rationalism—wrote to Mendelssohn that in the summer of 1780 he had visited Lessing. Much to his amazement, Lessing had confessed that he was a Spinozist, believing in the pantheist credo *hen kai pan*, “One and All,” and denying that there are final causes, free will, providence, or a personal God. Mendelssohn did not directly deny the authenticity of this report but tried to pre-empt the shockwave of Lessing’s confession by presenting in a book entitled *Morning Hours* (*Morgenstunden*) his own version of Lessing’s confession: that it was, at most, a sign of endorsing what Mendelssohn called “purified pantheism,” which admits that all things inhere in God’s intellect but denies that God is extended or without intellect and will—making Lessing’s God resemble that of Leibniz and Wolff’s. Jacobi, however, got to know about Mendelssohn’s plans, and both men hurried to be the first to publish his version of the issue. Jacobi won that race: in 1785, his quickly compiled *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (*Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*) was published a month before *Morning Hours*. This prompted Mendelssohn to write a refutation of Jacobi entitled *To the Friends of Lessing* (*An die Freunde Lessings*), in which he claimed that Jacobi had been fooled by Lessing’s penchant for dialectical skirmishes filled with paradoxes and that any of his putative confessions were thus not to be taken seriously. However, the cat was already out of the bag, the news of Lessing’s Spinozism having hit
the public consciousness. After having hastily delivered his final manuscript, in a cold winter’s day, to
the publisher, Mendelssohn fell ill and died a few days later, on 4 January 1786. This unexpected and
sad ending to the controversy made it a scandal, with many of Mendelssohn’s friends accusing Jacobi of
killing him.

The seemingly abrupt controversy did not appear from thin air. Lessing not only had studied
Spinoza since 1763 but also belonged to a faction of Lutherans that emphasized a direct individual
experience and relationship to the (pantheistically understood) God. By coincidence, 1763 is the year
when Jacobi found Spinoza as well. Thus by 1780, both had done their homework on Spinoza, drawing
very different conclusions from what they had learned. Mendelssohn, the prime representative of the
moderate Wolffian Enlightenment, knew his Spinoza well too. His Philosophical Dialogues
(Philosophische Gespräche) of 1755 is a pioneering attempt to present Spinoza in an impartial and even
sympathetic fashion. All this is in line with the fact that despite all the persecution and efforts to abolish
Spinozism, by 1780s Spinoza had made such an impact in Germany that there were a notable number
of crypto-Spinozists ready to be open about their convictions. If a thinker of Lessing’s stature,
reputation, and judgment was a Spinozist, there was no shame in being one. Jacobi’s intention was to
show, via Lessing’s example, that Spinozistic naturalism leads to fatalism, atheism, and—the word he
made known to modern philosophy—nihilism. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, was concerned that
Lessing’s reputation would become tarnished. Both were proved wrong, and something unexpected
happened: the controversy had the unintended effect of making Spinozism a kind of intellectual
fashion. In fact, many saw it as the only viable competitor to increasingly popular Kantianism. Spinoza’s
naturalism was widely deemed as the philosophy proper of the scientific worldview, whereas his
pantheism was interpreted in the religious register. The Romantic poet Novalis (1772–1801) famously
praised him as “the God-intoxicated man [der Gott betrunkene Mensch].” As a consequence, Spinozism
appeared, of all things, a welcome middle path between obsolete theism and straightforward atheism—
an astonishing turn of events for a philosophy not long ago condemned as heinously sacrilegious.

The ensuing German interest in Spinoza is so multifarious that we can only very superficially
survey it. Still, one work deserves a special mention: Johann Gottfried Herder’s (1744–1803) God,
Some Conversations (Gott: Einige Gespräche) of 1787. This book, which presents a bold and enthusiastic
interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy, had a major influence on how Spinoza was received in the aftermath of the pantheism controversy. Herder embraces Spinoza as an ingenious and profound thinker constrained by the obsolete view of the science of his era; as the eighteenth century had progressed, for instance biology, physics, and chemistry had shown that the mechanical sciences were unable to explain such phenomena as magnetism, electricity, gravitation, and living organisms—a new paradigm was needed. That paradigm, for Herder as for many other thinkers, was vitalism, and Herder saw nothing problematic in combining Spinoza’s system with it. This means that Herder adopts Spinoza’s monism—emphasizing the fact that it is a form of pantheism, not atheism—and sees Spinoza’s substance as a primal force that results in organisms endowed with living forces. Moreover, and more controversially, building on the fact that necessitarianism need not entail the denial of final causes, Herder claims that a pantheistic God can have understanding and will, and can thus act intentionally. This, in turn, is supposed to keep the specter of fatalism at bay.

Due to these developments, Spinoza’s philosophy was approached in an entirely new fashion: his naturalism was seen as the apogee of scientific rationalism, and his pantheistic monism inspired, in various ways, the major German Romantics and Idealists of the post-Kantian era. Some sought to incorporate aspects of Spinozism into their thought. For instance, J.W. Goethe (1749–1832) endeavored to conduct his botanical studies according to the model provided by Spinoza’s—his favorite philosopher’s—third kind of knowledge. But many others saw Spinozism as a formidable challenge to be overcome—especially after Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) subjectivity-emphasizing first Critique—as the philosophy “of the object.” To mention probably the two most notable thinkers in this regard, the whole philosophical career of F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854), who was a key philosopher of the Romantic era, revolved to a notable extent around Spinoza—perhaps most prominently in Schelling’s philosophy of nature. Slightly later, G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) contended that either one endorses Spinoza’s thought or has no philosophy at all; but for him, Spinozism—which Hegel saw as acosmism, or the denial of the reality of finite existents—is nevertheless just the beginning of philosophy, to be superseded by absolute idealism. Indeed, Spinoza’s system has relatively often—and one-dimensionally—been seen as a form of materialism and thus at odds with Hegelianism.
Key passages
E1p14–p16; 1p17s; 1app; 2p3s; 4pref; 5p42.

Secondary literature


Related entries
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