‘Spinoza’s ‘Atheism’, the *Ethics* and the TTP (09.05.20)

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“Nur Unverstand und Böswilligkeit konnten dieser Lehre das Beiwort "atheistisch" beilegen. Keiner hat sich jemals erhabener über die Gottheit ausgesprochen wie Spinoza.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

״רבותינו ז״ל אמרו מה הקב״ה ממלא את כל העולם, כך הנשמה ממלאה את כל הגוף. ורצונם שכמו שהקב״ה הוא *כולו בכל העולם* וכלו בכל חלק ממנו, כך הנשמה הטהורה היא כלה בכל הגוף וכלה בכל חלק ממנו״[[2]](#footnote-2)

Introduction

The impermanence of human affairs is a major theme in Spinoza’s discussions of political histories,[[3]](#footnote-3) and from our present-day perspective it is both intriguing and ironic to see how this very theme has played out in the evolving fate of Spinoza’s association with atheism. While Spinoza’s contemporaries charged him with atheism in order to impugn his philosophy (and sometimes his character), in our times many lay readers and some scholars portray Spinoza as an atheist in order to commemorate his role as a founder of modern secularism. In this paper, I will argue that Spinoza deserves neither vilification nor praise for being an atheist, for the simple reason that he was not one (unless one employs the term ‘atheism’ in a very peculiar sense).

I have chosen the current topic as my contribution to a volume focused on the TTP, the *Ethics,* and their interrelations because it is precisely these two books which brought about the common reactionary accusation of atheism by Spinoza’s contemporaries.[[4]](#footnote-4) Addressing Spinoza’s 1663 book, *Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy*, Bayle writes: “Spinoza appears as orthodox in that book about the nature of God.”[[5]](#footnote-5) As we shall shortly see, Descartes too was accused of atheism by some of his contemporaries (though not so by Bayle). The latter designates his target quite explicitly: “[Spinoza’s] *Tractatus Theologico Politicus*, printed in Amsterdam, in the year 1670, is a pernicious and execrable book which contains all the seeds of the Atheism he plainly discovered in his *Opera Posthuma*.”[[6]](#footnote-6) François Lamy, in his 1696 *Le nouvel athéisme renversé*, also focused on the *Ethics* and the TTP in his attack on Spinoza’s atheism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Bayle’s reference to the *Opera Posthuma* is ostensibly targeting the *Ethics* at least primarily, if not uniquely. Even the most suspicious and distrustful mind would have to labor hard in order to find atheism in the *Hebrew Grammar,* or even in the *Tractatus Politicus* where Spinoza argues that it is not within the power, and hence right, of the commonwealth to induce people to adopt *utterly absurd* beliefs, such as “that the whole is greater than its part or *that God does not exist*.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The TTP and the *Ethics* are the works where Spinoza launches his merciless attack on anthropocentric thinking and anthropomorphic religion. Spinoza’s panentheism (“*quicquid est, in Deo est*”) constitutes the metaphysical foundation of the *Ethics*, and it is repeatedly and clearly alluded to in the TTP.[[9]](#footnote-9) Since it is these two elements – (1) Spinoza’s open assertions of panentheism and (2) his critique of andromorphic conceptions of God – which are the historical grounds for the atheism charge, it seems natural that the merit of this charge should be decided primarily by examination of these two foundational works.

I will proceed in the following manner. In the first part of the paper, we will make our first acquaintance with the imputation of atheism by Spinoza’s contemporaries and Spinoza’s response to the charge (or lack thereof). In the second part, I discuss three broad strategies, or hermeneutic avenues, that have been pursued to impute atheism to Spinoza. The first of the three was dominant in Spinoza’s time, while the latter two were employed more recently. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and we can find occasionally various combinations of different shades of these three strategies. In this part, I will also raise some preliminary questions about the cogency of the hermeneutics employed by each strategy. In the third and fourth parts of the paper, I will discuss a small selection of key texts from the *Ethics* and the TTP, respectively, and argue that the atheist readings fail to make sense of these key passages (unless one adopts an extreme hermeneutics of suspicion which could allegedly find any view harbored in any text). Let me stress that this selection of passages is far from comprehensive, and that dozens of other passages can be adduced to establish the very same point. I hope by the end of the fourth part to convince the reader of the deep problems besetting the atheist readings. In the fifth and last part, I show that both panentheism and the critique of anthropomorphic religion and anthropomorphic conceptions of providence were quite common within rabbinic discourse. Thus, I will argue that if we are not in the business of announcing that both Maimonides and the Kabbalists were atheists, we should avoid the same imputation to Spinoza. Underlying my argument in this final part is the claim that at least some perceptions of Spinoza as an atheist are instances of what could be termed *conceptual colonialism*, i.e. the enforcement of the categories of a hegemonic culture (in this case, Western Christianity[[10]](#footnote-10)) on minority cultures (in the current case, rabbinic Judaism). To be clear, this attitude need not be motivated by ill intentions or racism. It is always tempting and easy to explain the unfamiliar through the familiar, but conceptual stagnation and insistence on imposing the categories of the familiar on other cultures may quickly lead to deep distortion and blindness, despite one’s best intentions. Unless one is exceedingly careful to avoid the – completely natural – temptation to impose one’s own categories on a foreign culture (and to look for the coin *only* under the street light), one is likely to end up with distorted conceptions of the relevant alien culture, despite one’s best intentions.

In one of the mottos to this article, Heine charges Spinoza’s reactionary contemporaries with malice for accusing Spinoza of atheism. Thank God malice is not at stake in the current celebration of Spinoza as an atheist. *What is at stake is what counts as a genuine religious view*. While in the past, the rejection of Jewish anti-anthropomorphic panentheism as a genuine religious view was frequently motivated by bigotry (hence Heine’s condemnation), the current imputation of atheism stems, arguably, from an ideological bent and disregard of a vast body of rabbinic literature. Both can be addressed amicably.

Part 1: “Those who do not blush to accuse Philosophers of Atheism”

In my introduction, I claimed that the TTP and the *Ethics*, Spinoza’s two major books, are also the primary causes for the imputation of atheism. We should note, however, that the *first* accusations of atheism predate the publication, and probably the writing, of the TTP. In an October, 1665 letter, Spinoza informed Henry Oldenburg of a “treatise on my opinion about scripture” that Spinoza was composing and of the three chief reasons which motivated him to do so. The second of the three reasons concerned “the opinion the common people have of me [*opinio, quam vulgus de me habet*]; they never stop accusing me of atheism.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Given this statement, one could expect the TTP to address and refute the charge of atheism, but it is barely mentioned in (the final version of) this work. Spinoza seemed to conclude that it was pointless to debate with the rabble, and thus at the beginning of the TTP he writes:

I care little of the snarls of the superstitious [*parum curans, quid superstitio ogganniat*], who hate no one more than those who cultivate true knowledge [*veram scientam*] and true life. Sadly, things have come to this: people who openly confess that they have no idea of God, and that they know God only through created things (whose causes they are ignorant of), do not blush to accuse Philosophers of Atheism.[[12]](#footnote-12)

‘*Vulgus*’ and ‘*superstitio’* are two of the most pejorative terms in Spinoza’s vocabulary, and Spinoza employs these terms as he refuses to engage the accusation; a philosophical debate with the *vulgus* is a waste of anyone’s time. In Part 3 below, we will return to the last passage in order to spell out Spinoza’s claim that his accusers know God “only through created things” (ultimately, this is a counter-accusation of idolatry), but, for now, let us have a quick look at some insightful claims by Leon Roth, an outstanding scholar of both Maimonides and early modern philosophy who attempted to explain Spinoza’s brushing off the atheism accusation:

Spinoza may well have considered himself safe from the charge of atheism which has been advanced against Maimonides for his denying human knowledge of God. A God indescribable in imaginational terms will never be recognized by the majority of mankind. ‘You say’, writes his friend Boxel, that you deny human attributes of God in order not to confuse the nature of God with that of man. So far, I approve. We do not perceive the way in which He wills and understands, considers, sees, and hears. But if you deny categorically the existence of these activities and the validity of our highest thoughts of God, and affirm that they are not in God, even in the “eminent” and metaphysical sense; then I do not understand your God – *tuum Deum ignore* – nor what you mean by the word.’[[13]](#footnote-13) And Spinoza can only point out, in reply, the old truth which he had learned from Maimonides: any imaginational attribute has significance only in relation to the ascriber; and there is no more objective reality in the human description of God advanced by Boxel than there would be in a mathematical description given, say, by a triangle, if it happened to be articulate.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Hugo Boxel – whose letter to Spinoza Roth cites – was genuinely perplexed by Spinoza’s views. Boxel was a legal scholar and politician; at least in terms of philosophical argumentation, he does not seem to have been the sharpest pencil in the box, and we find that Spinoza’s attitude toward him is somewhat condescending.[[15]](#footnote-15) Boxel, however, is not at all malicious. He really cannot understand what kind of God Spinoza has in mind if that God cannot see or hear or have other human perfections “eminently.”[[16]](#footnote-16) For Boxel, Spinoza is going too far in rejecting the ascription of *any* human perfection to God. While Boxel does not accuse Spinoza of atheism, one can easily see how a less friendly person who like Boxel assumes that ascribing human perfections to God is essential to religion would accuse Spinoza of atheism. Part of the issue here is the context against which Spinoza’s views are examined. As I will later show, radical rejection of the ascription of any human perfection to God was quite common in the rabbinic context, not only among Maimonides’ abundant philosophical followers, but also among many Kabbalists who adopted Maimonidean negative theology in their discourse about the *Ein-Sof*, the most intimate and true layer of the divinity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

One last text I wish to discuss in the context of the early accusation of atheism by Spinoza’s contemporaries is a letter by Lambertus van Velthuysen whom Curley aptly describes as a “defender of the new philosophy (of both Descartes and Hobbes).”[[18]](#footnote-18) Velthuysen was quite shocked by the claims of the TTP, and most of his letter addresses Spinoza’s audacious assertions about scripture and Christ. Towards the letter’s end, Velthuysen draws some general conclusions.

Here, most Distinguished Sir, you have a brief account of the main points of the teaching of this Theologico-politician. In my judgment his teaching destroys and completely subverts all worship and religion, *secretly introduces Atheism,* or at least imagines a God who cannot move men to reverence for his Divinity. His God is subjected to fate; no room is left for any divine governance or providence; the whole distribution of punishments and rewards is destroyed. At least it’s easy to see from the Author’s writing that the authority of the whole of Sacred Scripture is shattered by his reasoning and arguments, and that it is mentioned by the Author *only for the sake of the appearances*. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Velthuysen’s words are carefully crafted. The heretical or unorthodox nature of the TTP is salient even from the very surface of the text, but the same cannot be said about atheism. Here Velthuysen hesitates (“or at least imagines a God who cannot move men to reverence”) and avails himself of a hermeneutics of suspicion (“secretly introduces atheism,” “only for the sake of appearance”). Moreover, the letter immediately continues and concludes with an attack on Spinoza’s rejection of the exclusivity of the “oracles given to the Jews and Christian” and his implied willingness to recognize the Koran too as the Word of God.[[20]](#footnote-20) Why would an atheist strive to recognize specifically the Koran – rather than any other randomly picked book – as the Word of God? In order to answer this question, we will turn shortly to examine the use of the term ‘atheist’ in the seventeenth century. Let me just briefly note that Spinoza provides a remarkable response to Velthuysen’s hesitant accusation, but we will postpone discussing this response till the end of the paper.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Part 2: Three Strategies for ‘Atheism’

The term ‘atheist’ was used quite liberally in the early modern period. In his 1648 disputation on atheism, Voetius notes that the term is used in a broad and “calumnious sense.” [[22]](#footnote-22) For some early modern writers, ‘atheism’ was just a term for aberrant religious behavior. Thus, for example, Ioannes Caramuel y Lebkowitz (1606-1682), an impressive Spanish polymath and theologian, speaks about the “the atheism of the rabbis.”[[23]](#footnote-23) According to Voetius, what the various branches of atheism share is the divergence “direct or indirect from the proper knowledge of God, a real faith and a just worship of God which may be accompanied with attempts to remove religion and morality from themselves or from others.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Among renaissance and early modern figures who were accused of atheism by their contemporary foes, we find not only Pomponazzi and Descartes,[[25]](#footnote-25) but also Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, and Erasmus.[[26]](#footnote-26) “In the sixteenth century, two savants and two theologians could not dispute without accusing each other reciprocally of sodomy and atheism,” writes Théophile Gautier sardonically.[[27]](#footnote-27) According to Don Cameron Allen, in this period,

[A]n atheist was one who could not accept any religious principle shared by all Christian creeds. A Jew, a Mohameddan, a deist was an atheist, and the definition could be narrower: to many Protestants, the Pope was the chief of Roman Catholic atheists; to many a Roman Catholic, Canterbury was the head of the Anglican atheists.[[28]](#footnote-28)

That Spinoza made it into the list of seventeenth century ‘atheists’ is not a surprise (I would be surprised to learn that God – especially the God of your opponents – didn’t make it). Both his rejection of anthropomorphic religion and his panentheism clearly made his views about religion aberrant to many. Spinoza quickly realized that ‘atheism’ may well be employed as a term of abuse rather than a serious accusation of genuine denial of God’s existence. Hence, his first response to Velthuysen’s accusation does not even mention Spinoza’s own views about God: “atheists are accustomed to seek honors and riches immoderately. But I have always scorned those things. Everyone who knows me knows that.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Moreover, in chapter six of the TTP, Spinoza puts into action his high learning curve by accusing *his* opponents that their belief in miracles “would make us doubt everything and would lead to atheism.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

More than anything, this common and excessively liberal use of the term ‘atheist’ in the early modern period is an indication of narrow-mindness and intolerance. If the *only* legitimate concept of God is *my* concept, then it may well be the case that Spinoza, Descartes, “the Rabbis,” the Pope, and the Archbishop of Canterbury are all ‘atheists.’ All that is needed to justify this use of the term is that I vehemently deny the concepts of God entertained by each of the members of this disreputable list.

Were Boxel and Velthuysen exemplifying such narrow-minded attitude? I tend to think that at least in the case of Boxel, we can explain his thinking by simple ignorance rather than intolerance. Boxel seems to be unfamiliar with a genuine religious tradition that refuses to ascribe *any* human perfection to God, and it is this inadequate knowledge that led to his perplexity as he was trying to understand Spinoza’s views. For our purposes, I would like to designate the term, the ‘*narrow-minded strategy*,’ for the hermeneutic path for imputing ‘atheism’ to Spinoza (and the Pope, etc.) which we have discussed in the last two pages, no matter whether this strategy is motivated by intolerance, or innocuous ignorance. We will return to discuss this strategy later in the paper, but for the time being, let me just note that in the sense defined in the past few pages, *Spinoza (and the Rabbis) are indeed atheists* (i.e., they hold aberrant religious views in the eyes of many).

I turn to the second hermeneutic strategy for imputing atheism to Spinoza. The question of Spinoza’s alleged atheism depends significantly on what kind of *theos* is at stake. We have plenty of textual evidence showing that Spinoza did not believe in a God who is the supreme king of the world and who judges, punishes, and loves his creatures. One might think that it was just Spinoza’s harsh critique of such conceptions of the divine that led Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi – who otherwise had some occasional insightful readings of Spinoza – to describe Spinoza as an atheist.[[31]](#footnote-31) It is worth noting, however, that immediately after pronouncing Spinozism as atheism, Jacobi adds that “the philosophy of the Kabbalah… is nothing but undeveloped or newly confused Spinozism.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Thus, relying on the transitivity of identity, we may infer that, for Jacobi, *the Kabbalah* is nothing but undeveloped, or confused, atheism. It would thus seem to follow that millions of observant Jews who follow Kabbalistic theories and rituals, pray three times a day, and spend fifteen hours a day studying Talmud are just a bunch of …. confused or tacit atheists. And this conclusion does seem somewhat too odd.

Spinoza’s critique of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphic religion played an important role in shaping Jacobi’s view of Spinoza, but the latter was also molded by Jacobi’s fideistic view of the relationship between faith and reason. For Jacobi, Spinoza was the consistent rationalist who made no concessions in adhering to the ‘*a nihilo nihil fit’* principle.[[33]](#footnote-33) Consistent Leibnizianism, says Jacobi, leads back to Spinoza.[[34]](#footnote-34) The only escape from the tyranny of Spinozistic rationalism was a fideistic leap of faith.[[35]](#footnote-35) Jacobi was clearly aware of the numerous passages in the *Ethics* that are inconsistent with denying the existence of God, but he simply did not believe Spinoza’s words. Thus, immediately after asserting that Spinozism is atheism, Jacobi notes:

I am far from charging all Spinozists with denying God. But precisely for this reason the demonstration that, when properly understood, Spinoza’s doctrine does not admit any kind of religion does not seem superfluous to me. A certain Spinozistic froth [*Schaum*] is on the contrary quite compatible with all species of superstition and enthusiasm; one can blow the most beautiful bubbles with it. *The committed atheist should not hide behind this froth; the rest must not be deceived by it*.[[36]](#footnote-36)

It seems that for Jacobi, once Spinoza is recognized as the most consistent explorer of reason, *he must be an atheist* since reason necessarily leads to atheism; if Spinoza’s explicit claims are inconsistent with atheism, they *must* be deemed mere deceptions.[[37]](#footnote-37)

In the twentieth century, Jacobi’s position was popularized by Leo Strauss whose 1921 doctoral dissertation focused on Jacobi. “The ultimate justification of Spinoza’s critique is the atheism from intellectual probity which overcomes orthodoxy radically by understanding it radically” writes Strauss in the preface to his early *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*.[[38]](#footnote-38) For Strauss, a thinker *cannot* be a citizen of both Athens and Jerusalem. To the extent that Maimonides, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke were philosophers, they *must* be atheists.[[39]](#footnote-39) Strauss’ Tertulianian convictions[[40]](#footnote-40) place him in the very same boat with Jacobi and the *vulgus* in accusing Spinoza of atheism. For all three, religion and faith *must* be anthropomorphic, and any talk of a conception of God free from anthropomorphic thinking *must* be deemed dissimulation.

In the following, I will refer to this path for imputing theism to Spinoza as the ‘*straussian strategy*.’ It consists of two crucial elements. First, it *assumes* – I am not aware of anything remotely similar to a serious argument for this view in Strauss’ writing on the subject – the irreconcilability of reason and belief in God.[[41]](#footnote-41) Then, in a resulting second step, it brushes off the numerous passages throughout the *Ethics* which contradict this view as “appeasing terminology” whose aim is “to hide rather than reveal Spinoza’s real starting-point.”[[42]](#footnote-42) The air of grand conspiracy theory is salient in every page of Strauss’ discussion of Spinoza, and one may well respond to it by noting that while it is difficult to prove the logical impossibility of conspiracy theories, the kind of suspicion hermeneutics employed by Strauss could be equally deployed to show that the *Ethics* is a secret code to, say, a hitherto unknown Bulgarian translation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.

Still, every hypochondriac is sometimes right, and it is also true that occasionally, Spinoza is writing between the lines. Can we point out clear differences between Spinoza’s between-the-lines writing and Strauss’ conspiracy theories? I think we can, and shortly we will look closely at a small selection of texts and consider the viability of a Straussian reading of these texts. For the time being, let me just note that in the vast majority of cases, the “esoteric” meaning behind Spinoza’s between-the-lines writing is in fact quite clear. Consider, for example, Spinoza’s notes on the Trinity. When Spinoza claims that “we *cannot* form any clear and distinct concept of it,”[[43]](#footnote-43) and that “what theologians understand by the term personality escapes me, but not what philologist understand by that word,”[[44]](#footnote-44) it is difficult *not* to realize that for Spinoza, this doctrine is unintelligible. Were Spinoza to claim in a similar manner that God’s existence cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived, or even more mildly, that one can know God only through faith, but not through demonstration, the Straussian reading might have had a case. Alas, Spinoza never made such claims.

I turn now to the third and last path for imputing atheism to Spinoza which I will henceforth call the “*redundancy strategy*.” The core of this strategy is the claim that Spinoza’s identification of God and Nature makes God completely redundant in his ontology. The most lucid case for this strategy has been made recently by Steven Nadler.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The concept of God is at the very core of Spinoza’s philosophy (both in the *Ethics* and in the TTP), and thus, any serious attempt to interpret Spinoza as an atheist must explain both the interpreter’s own understanding of the concept of God and what Spinoza understood by this crucial notion. In his characteristically lucid and transparent manner, Nadler provides the following account of what Spinoza means by ‘God.’

Spinoza certainly does *not* mean by ‘God’ what the Judeo-Christian religious tradition means by ‘God.’ In the first place, the God of Judaism and Christianity is a transcendent being, ontologically distinct from the world it creates; Spinoza’s God, is not a supernatural being that stands outside of the world; God *is* nature.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The essentialist characterization of the so called ‘Judeo-Christian God’ as transcendent and the contrast drawn between the alleged Judeo-Christian God and the Spinozist God seems crucial for Nadler’s argument and for this reason it deserves close attention.[[47]](#footnote-47) While I commend the forthrightness of this passage, I believe it contains several critical inaccuracies and odd assertions.

**(1)** The notion of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” had a problematic political pedigree even before it was deployed by neo-conservative circlers, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, as part of an argument for the exclusion of Muslims, but I will not dwell on that here. For our purposes, the crucial question is what the analytical value of this notion is. It might, perhaps, make sense to claim that the beliefs that Abraham was the father of Isaac, that Isaac was the father Jacob, and that all three were pious people, are shared by both Christians and Jews (and Muslims). It is highly misleading, however, to claim that there is a Judeo-Christian concept of God. In fact, it is even misleading to speak about a “Jewish” concept of God. As I will argue in Part 5 below, rabbinic sources *never* developed a consensus – or anything remotely close to a consensus – about the true nature of God. Some, like Maimonides, held that God has no physical features whatsoever, others argued that God is present in every inch of space, while still others claimed that they can tell you the precise measures of God’s *finite* bodily organs (such as his right hand).[[48]](#footnote-48) In fact, it was Spinoza himself who observed that even among Biblical authors there is a huge variety of conceptions of God, and that Moses’ concept of God was very different from that of the Patriarchs.[[49]](#footnote-49)

**(2)** One of the best illustrations of the radical diversity of Jewish conceptions of God concerns the issue of God’s transcendence. Even just within the Bible, there are passages which assert that God is separate from – or above – nature, but also many passages which assert that God *fills* nature. Consider, for example, Jeremiah 23:24: “For I fill the heavens and the earth [את השמים ואת הארץ אני מלא].” Talmudic literature is replete with both transcendent conceptions of God and strongly anti-transcendent conceptions of God. Thus, for example, we are told that Rav Sheshet, a Babylonian Talmudist who was a blind person, would ask his assistant to prepare him for prayer by placing him facing any direction other than east in order to avoid the practice of certain local idolaters who used to pray to the east. Yet, Rav Sheshet would always explain to his assistants that this is *not* because God is not present in the east. On the contrary, he would insist, God is everywhere and in every direction of space.[[50]](#footnote-50) In medieval rabbinic literature, the view that God is present in all of space is abundant and can be found in numerous texts and in almost all strata of this literature, from philosophy, through sermons, liturgy, bible commentaries, to the Kabbalah. The Zohar, the canonical and foundational text of the Kabballah, states in a typical formulation: “God surrounds all the worlds, and no thing surrounds him… *none can be outside him*; he fills all the worlds and nothing else fills him [איהו סובב כל עלמין, ולית סובב לון... ולית מאן דנפק מרשותיה לבר, ולית אוחרא ממלא לון״].”[[51]](#footnote-51) Moses Cordovero, the major sixteenth-century Kabbalist, argues that since everything is in God, we must admit that whenever we feed ourselves with plants and animals, “we consume nothing but the divine.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Closer to Spinoza’s home, in early seventeenth-century Amsterdam, we find the Kabbalist, Abraham Cohen Herrera, the teacher of Spinoza’s teachers, asserting that not only do all *actual* things and places reside in God, but even all *possibilia* are in God.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The few brief examples just cited are just drops from a huge bucket. We will return later to discuss rabbinic views on pantheism and panentheism, but for the time being, I can only say that the claim that the “Jewish God” must “stand outside of the world” is patently false. One simply cannot brush away the Zohar as a non-essential text.

**(3)** Transcendence and immanence are indeed opposed characteristics, but one may well *consistently* conceive of God as having some aspects, that are transcendent, while others are immanent. Shortly, I will argue that Spinoza held this very view, and that the mainstream of the Kabbalah asserted it as well. **(4)** In the quote above, Nadler contrasts the alleged Judeo-Christian conception of God as transcendent with Spinoza’s affirmation that “God is Nature.” The problem with this contrast is that “God is Nature” was a slogan affirmed by numerous Kabbalists and rabbinic texts. So much so, that in a recent article, Moshe Idel, the eminent Kabbalah scholar, suggested that Spinoza might have adopted this slogan from Kabbalistic sources.[[54]](#footnote-54) Should we disregard the Kabbalah and the other rabbinic sources affirming the identity of God and Nature because they do not fit the alleged “Judeo-Christian conception of God”? Why?

Let us turn now to the claim that Spinoza’s God adds nothing to his ontology of nature. The context of the following passage is Nadler’s attempt to disassociate Spinoza from what he calls “immanentist pantheism,” i.e., the view that “God is distinct from the world but nonetheless ubiquitously contained” in it, just like “water is contained in a soaked sponge.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

…Spinoza explicitly tells us that God is “immanent” in Nature, he clearly is not a pantheist in the first immanentist sense. The phrase ‘God or Nature’ is intended to assert a strict numerical identity between God and Nature, and not a containment relationship. God is not “in” nature in such a way that nature contains, in addition to its natural contents, a distinctive divine and supernatural content.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Spinoza’s God, according to the last passage, is nothing over and above nature, and as such it seems to add nothing to Spinoza’s ontology. In order to address the claims of the last passage it would be helpful to clarify a certain ambiguity in our use of the term ‘immanence.’ Does Spinoza ever tell us that “God is ‘immanent’ in nature”? The terminology of immanence is used by Spinoza in one, and only one, context, i.e., as a qualification of the notion of an ‘efficient cause’. An ‘immanent cause’ [*causa immanens*] is just a sub-category of the efficient cause. Specifically, an immanent cause is an efficient cause whose effect inheres in the cause. As such, it is contrasted with the notion of ‘transient cause’ [*causa transiens*], which is an efficient cause whose effect does not inhere in the cause.[[57]](#footnote-57) Spinoza indeed explicitly claims that God is the immanent cause of all things (E1p18), but this means that *all things are in God* (or inhere in God), and not, that *God is in all things* (i.e., nature). The direction of the *in alio* relation is highly important, since it denotes strong, asymmetric ontological dependence, and it is one thing to claim that the totality of finite things depend on God, and completely another thing to say that God depends on the totality of finite things. Spinoza asserts the former, and openly rejects the latter.[[58]](#footnote-58)

In the passage above, Nadler is using the term ‘immanent’ in its twentieth- (or twenty-first) century sense, as something which is inside the world, or is part of nature.[[59]](#footnote-59) This sense of ‘immanent’ has some vague similarity with Spinoza’s use of the term, though, in order to avoid confusion, we must be keenly aware that this is not Spinoza’s use of the term.

It is in the latter, twenty-first century sense of ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ that Spinoza’s God is commonly described as immanent, and not transcendent. By a transcendent God, we normally understand a divinity that has at least some aspects which are beyond our world and beyond what we can experience.[[60]](#footnote-60) Thus, the radically transcendent God of negative theology is wholly beyond our grasp and access, while the providential God of many religious communities is only partly transcendent since he acts in the world.

Against the common slogan that Spinoza’s God is immanent, I would argue that Spinoza’s God has significant transcendent features. He is not as transcendent as the God of negative theology, but barring this exception, Spinoza’s conception of God is arguably one of the most transcendent notions of the divine. Let me explain this scandalous claim.

Spinoza’s God (or Nature) has infinitely many attributes (E1d6). We live in, and are familiar with, only two of these infinitely many attributes: Extension (the realm of bodies and motion), and Thought (the realm of ideas and volitions).[[61]](#footnote-61) Each of the infinitely many unknown attributes of God are just as real as Extension and Thought. Yet, Spinoza has solid reasons for the claim that we have no causal and cognitive access to any of these infinitely many unknown attributes.[[62]](#footnote-62) Thus, it is only a tiny fraction of the complete reality of God (or Nature) that we know, or may know. The remaining infinitely many unknown attributes of God are completely beyond our grasp, i.e., they completely transcend the world *as we know it*.[[63]](#footnote-63)

But isn’t Spinoza saying repeatedly that God *is* Nature? And is this claim not a statement of identity? I answer both questions positively. However, I would argue that here we use the term ‘nature’ in a certain equivocal sense. In some cases, we understand by ‘nature’ the world *we* experience, i.e., the realm of bodies and minds. In other cases, we use ‘nature’ as denoting Spinoza’s substance which has *infinitely* many attributes. To avoid this confusion, I suggest that we reserve ‘natureOurs’ for the world of bodies and minds which we encounter in our experience and science, and use ‘natureSpinoza’ to denote Spinoza’s substance with its infinitely many attributes. One place where Spinoza draws our attention to this possible equivocation is in a note he added to chapter six of the TTP.

NB: By Nature here I do not understand only matter and its affections, but in addition to matter, infinite other things.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The context of this note makes clear that the “infinite other things [*alia infinita*]” are just the infinite attributes.

Spinoza’s God is identical with natureSpinoza, yet natureOurs is just two of the infinitely many attributes of Spinoza’s God.[[65]](#footnote-65) Spinoza’s God does not transcend natureSpinoza, but it does transcend natureOurs.[[66]](#footnote-66) If you wish, we may state the very same point by claiming that natureSpinoza *transcends* natureOurs. Thus, while I agree that *Deus sive Natura* can be legitimately read as an identity claim, it is absolutely crucial to realize that these are not just the realms of bodies and minds that constitute nature which is said to be identical with Spinoza’s God. With the exception of Thought and Extension, all the other infinitely many attributes of *Deus sive Natura*, transcend everything *we experience* as nature.

Another way to state the last point relies on the distinction between pantheism and panentheism. If pantheism asserts the identity of God and Nature (qua the totality of bodies and minds), panentheism states that all bodies and minds are in God, yet they do not *exhaust* God, since there are aspects of God beyond physical and mental nature.[[67]](#footnote-67) Spinoza is a panentheist – rather than a pantheist – since the infinitely many unknown and inaccessible attributes and their modes transcend the world we experience. This is not merely a matter of our inability to *know* the attributes. We cannot have any *causal* interaction with these infinitely many layers of existence. These other attributes of God are just as real as Extension and Thought, and yet we have no ontological (and cognitive) access to them. Thus, almost all of God’s infinitely many attributes are not only not present in our world of extended and thinking nature, but they cannot even affect anything in our experience. What can be more transcendent than that? [[68]](#footnote-68)

According to Nadler, “even the atheist can, without too much difficulty, admit that God is nothing but nature.”[[69]](#footnote-69) I very much doubt this, since the atheist presumably denies the reality of God, while affirming the reality of nature. Thus, the two *cannot* be identical. Perhaps one might suggest that Spinoza was an atheist *disguising* himself as a pantheist (here we are seamlessly switching to the Straussian strategy).[[70]](#footnote-70) Thus, one might argue that Spinoza expressed a nominal and disingenuous commitment to the existence of a fully naturalized God for political reasons, i.e., in order to avoid the charge of atheism. This suggestion would also not work, since the religious credentials of pantheism in early modern Christian Europe were not much better than those of the atheist, and Spinoza was keenly aware of this fact.[[71]](#footnote-71) It would have been quite foolish on Spinoza’s side to attempt to avoid religious persecution by pretending to be merely a pantheist.

The final step in Nadler’s *redundancy strategy* is the suggestion that the true difference between pantheism and atheism lies in the emotional attitude one has toward God/Nature. According to Nadler, the pantheist shares with all other theists the reverential and fearful attitude toward God/Nature, while the atheist views nature in unadorned, prosaic, terms.[[72]](#footnote-72) This is an interesting suggestion, though pace Nadler, I believe this very consideration should lead to the conclusion that Spinoza is not an atheist.[[73]](#footnote-73) Whereas Nadler asserts that “Spinoza clearly does *not* believe that the proper attitude to take toward nature is worship, awe, or reverence,” I would argue that the cases of worship, on the one hand, and awe and reverence, on the other hand, should be considered apart: Spinoza would reject worship of nature,[[74]](#footnote-74) yet he exhibits an attitude of awe and reverence toward God/Nature, awe and reverence which are not much different from the proper attitude Maimonides (and many Kabbalists) would suggest is proper toward God.

A central distinction within rabbinic religious ethics which can be traced to early Mishnaic literature distinguishes between two types of awe toward God: *fearful awe* [*ira’t ha-onesh*] vs. *awe of sublimity* [*ira’t ha-romemut*]*.*[[75]](#footnote-75) Fearful awe is just the awe one might have toward God as the judge who is certain to punish sinners for their misdeeds. This is clearly not an attitude Spinoza expects a philosopher to exhibit toward God/Nature. However, this is also not an attitude Maimonides (or any of the rabbinic sources he relies upon) would consider as proper toward God. Fearful awe, Maimonides would claim, is an attitude one should teach to children and uneducated people who are, allegedly, incapable of conceiving God in non-anthropomorphic manner.[[76]](#footnote-76) Religious practice out of fearful awe is *permissible*, claims Maimonides, either as an educational step toward a higher conception of God, or as a realistic compromise with the limited cognitive capacities of most people.[[77]](#footnote-77) [[78]](#footnote-78) Awe of *sublimity* is, according to Maimonides, the proper attitude one should exhibit toward God, once one cleansed his mind from anthropomorphic thinking.[[79]](#footnote-79) Do we have any evidence of Spinoza conceiving God/Nature as *sublime*?

We will shortly return to this question as we pursue a very brief study of key passages in the *Ethics*. For the time being, let me tentatively summarize our findings so far. It is agreed that Spinoza is vehemently opposed to anthropomorphic conceptions of God.[[80]](#footnote-80) We also agree that Spinoza identifies God with some concept of nature, and that discussions of God permeates all of Spinoza’s philosophical works. The atheist interpretations seem to think this is mere “language that *seems* deeply religious,”[[81]](#footnote-81) while “in substance, Spinoza is an atheist.”[[82]](#footnote-82) I believe that it is virtually impossible to make sense of some of the most fundamental claims of both the *Ethics* and the TTP without ascribing to Spinoza genuine commitment to the conception and existence of a non-anthropomorphic God in which everything that is – is. I will not argue with the partisans of the *narrow-minded strategy* for imputing atheism to Spinoza, since – as I have noted before – in this use of the term ‘atheist’ Spinoza *is* an atheist (as are, Maimonides, ‘the rabbis’, and perhaps even the Pope). In the following two parts we will examine a small selection of key passages and claims from both the *Ethics* and the TTP attempting to determine which reading better fits the text.

Part 3: The Evidence of the *Ethics*

*1. Absolute Infinity.* – Spinoza’s definition of God at the opening of the *Ethics* is, arguably, the deepest foundation of the immense conceptual structure of the entire book:

E1d6: By God I understand a being *absolutely infinite*, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence.

Exp.: I say *absolutely infinite*, not infinite in its own kind; for if something is only infinite in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes of it [NS: (i.e., we can conceive infinite attributes which do not pertain to its nature)], but if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Absolute infinity is the essential characterization of Spinoza’s God. In E1d6 and its explication, Spinoza spells out the notion of a being absolutely infinite [*ens absolutè infinitum*] as being a substance consisting of infinitely many attributes, each of which is infinite in its own kind. Now, let’s assume Spinoza were an atheist. As he clearly admitted, he was familiar with only two of God’s/Nature’s infinitely many attributes, i.e., Extension and Thought.[[84]](#footnote-84) Under these conditions, it would perhaps make sense for Spinoza to claim that though we know only two attributes of nature, nature *might have* more attributes, perhaps even infinitely many attributes. But this is not what he is saying. Spinoza categorically and unhesitatingly asserts that God *has* infinitely many attributes.[[85]](#footnote-85) Why make this extremely strong claim about nature having infinitely many unknown attributes, when all the empirical data we have about nature is explainable by the mere existence of Extension and Thought? There is indeed a clear *religious* tradition that ascribes to God infinitely many attributes,[[86]](#footnote-86) but the atheist clearly rejects this religious tradition. So why should she commit herself to this extravagant claim that has no ground in anything we know about nature? I am not aware of any text in which Spinoza even attempts to explain why nature must have infinitely many attributes. Perhaps there is one. But at this point, it seems that the *onus probandi* is on the side of the atheist readings, since there seems to be a very clear religious tradition and motivation for ascribing absolute infinity and infinity of attributes to God.

*2. The Sublime.* – Both in the *Ethics* and in his letters, Spinoza asserts the existence of an unbridgeable gap between God and created things.[[87]](#footnote-87) We have already met Hugo Boxel and his assertion that one should not completely deny all human perfections from God (see Part 1 above). In the following passage Spinoza responds to one of Boxel’s arguments in favor of the existence of spirits, or ghosts.

Your second argument is that because spirits are more like God than the other, corporeal creatures, it is also probable that God created them. Truly, I confess I still don’t know in what respect spirits are more like God than other creatures are. *I know this: that there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite; so the difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God*. [[88]](#footnote-88)

According to Spinoza’s claims in the last passage there is an unbridgeable gap between God and created things. There is no incremental way to go from finite things to God. Can we say the same about nature? Consider the following three concrete items: (1) SPECK, a certain speck of dust that is currently on my desk, (2) NATURE, i.e., nature as a whole, and (3) NATURE-SANS-SPECK, i.e., entire nature (i.e., NATURE) with the only exception of SPECK. Is the difference between SPECK and NATURE, the same as the difference between NATURE-SANS-SPECK and NATURE?[[89]](#footnote-89)

Let us return now to the question of whether Spinoza would allow for a psychological attitude of *awe of sublimity* toward God/Nature. The modern discipline of western ‘aesthetics’, with its focus on the normative evaluation of feelings, would be launched a few years after Spinoza’s death. From its very inception, the feeling of the sublime stood at the very center of this disciple. But what is the proper object which should create in us this feeling? In his celebrated discussion of the sublime in the Second *Critique*, Kant suggests it is “the *absolutely great* [*absolute, non comparative magnum*]” or “that *which is great beyond all comparison*.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Kant’s view is partly indebted to Edmund Burke’s highly influential treatise *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Here is Burke’s claim about the most proper cause of our feeling of the sublime.

*Infinity* has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is *the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime.**[[91]](#footnote-91)*

For both Burke and Kant, infinity is the paradigmatic object of the feeling of the sublime. Burke and Kant developed their aesthetic theories relying on widely received societal perceptions of human feelings. Thus, it seems that in the opening of the *Ethics*, Spinoza chooses to define God/Nature through the superlative (“absolute”) instantiation of infinity which the leading early modern theoretician of the sublime believed to be the most proper object of this feeling. Would not Spinoza’s God “fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime”?

*3. Eternity.* – Shortly after defining God, Spinoza presents the following definition of eternity.

E1d8: By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.

Explication: For such existence, like the essence of a thing, is conceived as an eternal truth, and on that account cannot be explicated by duration or time, even if the duration is conceived to be without beginning or end.

There are several intriguing features in this definition, not the least of which is its patent circularity. In another work, I argue that eternity – as defined in E1d8 – is really a *modal* notion; more specifically, eternity is self-necessitated existence.[[92]](#footnote-92) I will not assume this reading in the following. For our purposes it would suffice to note that in the *explicatio* of E1d8, Spinoza explicitly denies that eternity could be equated with existence in all times, or everlastingness.

Intriguingly, in an earlier work, Spinoza opens a space for a certain “second best” notion of eternity—eternity as everlastingness—*as long as it is not applied to God*.

So we pass to the second question and ask whether what *has been created could have been created from eternity*.

To understand the question rightly, we must attend to this manner of speaking: “from eternity.” For by this we wish to signify here something *altogether different from what we explained previously when we spoke of God’s eternity*. Here we understand nothing but a duration without any beginning of duration, or a duration so great that, even if we wished to multiply it by many years, or tens of thousands of years, and this product in turn by tens of thousands, we could still never express it by any number, however large.[[93]](#footnote-93)

According to this passage, the eternity of “what has been created” is “altogether different” from God’s eternity. In another passage in the *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza stresses again that strict eternity “is to be attributed to God alone,” while created things can at most be everlasting.[[94]](#footnote-94) Similarly, in the *Ethics*, too, Spinoza asserts that eternity insofar as it involves the necessary existence of E1d8 “is the very essence of God” (E5p30d).

Now, suppose Spinoza were a good, secular atheist: Why should he attribute to *nature* this kind of existence that does not belong to created things? According to Nadler, “Spinoza did not elevate nature into the divine. On the contrary, he reduced the divine to nature.”[[95]](#footnote-95) Should not the ascription of strict eternity (and absolute infinity) to God/Nature count as elevation of nature into the divine?

4. *The Nature of Nature*. – In the course of arguing for his variant of the atheist reading, Nadler makes the following string of claims:

Spinoza’s fundamental insight in Part One is that Nature is an indivisible, infinite, uncaused, substantial whole, in fact, it is the *only* substantial whole. Outside of Nature there is nothing, and everything that exists, is part of Nature.[[96]](#footnote-96)

There seem to be several inaccuracies in this passage. In Part One of the *Ethics*, Spinoza never claims that either God or Nature is *uncaused*, but rather that God/Nature is *causa sui*. Similarly, I do not think Spinoza can allow for any substantial whole given his proof of the indivisibility of substance (Ep12). More important, it is worth noting that all of the qualities discussed in the passage above (indivisibility, infinity, self-causation, etc.[[97]](#footnote-97)) are not inferred from Spinoza’s definition of *nature*, for the simple reason that the *Ethics* contains no such definition.[[98]](#footnote-98) Spinoza put much effort and time in crafting precisely the key terms of his metaphysics, but ‘nature’ is not one of these terms. Given the great care Spinoza invested in elucidating his key terms, it would be odd for him to reduce the concept of God to that of nature because *the notion of nature plays a very marginal, if any, role in the demonstrations of the Ethics*. Thus, for example, Spinoza did not prove that *nature* is infinite because such a proof would normally require an explication and definition of the nature of nature. It seems that Spinoza did not find this question urgent throughout the almost two decades during which he was composing the *Ethics*.

The very last claim in the passage above – “everything is part of nature” – points to another good reason to avoid unqualified identification of God and Nature. As Nadler rightly notes, Spinoza would occasionally speak about ‘part of nature.’ [[99]](#footnote-99) In contrast, Spinoza would never use the term ‘part of God.’ His commitment to the indivisibility of the substance and its attributes (E1p12 and E1p13) precludes any such talk.

5. *Proving the Existence of… Nature?* – In E1p11d, Spinoza presents a series of intricate and highly sophisticated proofs for the existence of God. Most of these proofs are original and not mere rearrangements of the proofs presented by predecessors such as Descartes, Maimonides, or Anselm.[[100]](#footnote-100) The rigorous establishment and elucidation of the various claims upon which these proofs rely is the main task of the propositions preceding E1p11. Now, were Spinoza an atheist, aiming at simply reducing God to nature, this entire venture would seem to be absolutely pointless, for how could it make any sense to prove that *nature* exists? Who denies that? Do we have *any* textual evidence showing that Spinoza entertained the slightest worry about the existence of nature?

The Straussian might perhaps suggest that the aim of Spinoza’s proofs of God’s existence was merely political, i.e., that these proofs merely aimed at relieving him from the suspicion of atheism, and that he was not truly committed to their content. Indeed, Strauss himself suggests that Spinoza’s argument for the existence of God “hides rather reveals his real starting-point,”[[101]](#footnote-101) and that we should search Spinoza’s writings, and especially the TTP, in order to find “Spinoza’s concealed atheistic principles” which are the true ground of the book. But, if the aim of the proofs of God’s existence was merely political, why use these highly sophisticated arguments which the *vulgus* was hardly capable of appreciating?[[102]](#footnote-102) Why not endorse instead one of the traditional and widely received arguments? Moreover, if one is willing to dismiss the beginning of Part One of the *Ethics* as a masked political argument that should not be taken too seriously, why should we consider the rest of the book – which relies heavily on the opening of the *Ethics* – as a serious and genuine work of philosophy?

6. *Order of Philosophizing.* – In E2p10 – “The being [*esse*] of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man” – Spinoza argues against the Cartesian conception of man as a substance. The scholium to this proposition begins with questioning a common conception of the notion of essence as the set of qualities necessary for the existence of a thing.[[103]](#footnote-103) Spinoza then turns to the crucial issue of the “proper order of philosophizing.” Spinoza’s claims here are quite radical since he is not merely asserting – like some of his predecessors – that God is prior to everything else both ontologically and epistemologically, but that even the order of *discovery*, the point of departure from which we initiate the philosophical exploration *must begin with God*. The core of Spinoza’s argument in this passage is that if we begin philosophizing by contemplating first finite things, and only then ascending to the knowledge of the infinite, we are doomed to misunderstand both the infinite and the finite things. The reason for this double failure is, briefly, that it is impossible to know finite things without the infinite on which they depend.[[104]](#footnote-104) Complementarily, we will fail to know the infinite too, since after contemplating finite things, we would naturally attempt to conceive of the infinite in the image of the finite things with which we are acquainted.[[105]](#footnote-105) Here is the passage in its entirety:

The cause of this, I believe, was that they did not observe the [proper] order of Philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in cognition[[106]](#footnote-106) and in nature) is last in the order of cognition, and that the things that are called objects of the senses are prior to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the cognition of natural things, because these could not assist cognition of the divine nature.[[107]](#footnote-107)

Now, how could we understand this passage under the atheist readings? Why would an atheist criticize those who “contemplated natural things” without first understanding “the divine nature”? Isn’t this - i.e., knowing natural things without presupposing God – precisely what the atheist wholeheartedly recommends? And why would an atheist complain that the “cognition of natural things” could “not assist the cognition of the divine nature”? Or, if we wish to pose an even more basic question: Why should an atheist insist that the divine nature should be “contemplated before all else”? One cannot answer the last question by suggesting that the phrase was just obscure and meant merely to assert the priority of the whole of nature, for two trivial reasons. First, for Spinoza, the divine nature, or *natura naturans*, is indivisible (see E1p12 and Ep13), and thus, is not a whole. Second, Spinoza’s basic mereological premise is that parts are prior to their wholes, both in nature *and in cognition*.[[108]](#footnote-108) Interestingly, Spinoza himself felt that the issues raised in the last excerpt evince the absurdity of accusing him of atheism.

Sadly, things have come to this: people who openly confess that they have no idea of God, and *that they know God only through created things (whose causes they are ignorant of)*, do not blush to accuse Philosophers of Atheism.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The texts we have examined in this part of the paper belong to the very core of the argumentation of the *Ethics* and cannot be brushed off as marginal and unimportant assertions. We can adduce more passages of this kind. In fact, much of Part Five of the *Ethics* and its discussion of salvation is barely intelligible under the atheist readings. Let us see now whether these readings fare any better with the TTP.

Part 4: The Evidence of the *Theological Political Treatise*

1. *Knowing by natural light that God exists.* – In Chapter Five of the TTP, Spinoza discusses the reasons and import of religious ceremonies and the belief in religious narratives. In the latter context, he writes:

Someone who is not familiar with [the religious narratives], and nevertheless knows [*novit*] by the natural light that God exists…that person is completely blessed [*beatum omnino esse*]. Indeed, he is more blessed than the common people [*vulgus*], because in addition to true opinions [*veras opiniones*], he has a clear and distinct conception.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Normally, we would read this passage as presenting a contrast between the *vulgus*’ cognition of God’s existence through opinion [*opinio*] – the lowest kind of cognition[[111]](#footnote-111) – that might happen by coincidence to be more or less true, and the philosopher’s adequate conception of God’s existence. Spinoza stresses that both the philosopher and the *vulgus* achieve blessedness, though the blessedness of the philosopher, unlike that of the *vulgus*, is complete. Now, how are we going to read this passage according to the atheistic interpretations? For Spinoza, knowing [*novit*] by natural light is just non-mystical, *adequate* cognition. The object of this adequate knowledge is… God’s existence. So how can God *not* exist? Perhaps one might suggest that the object of this knowledge is merely the existence of *nature*. However, in such a case the achievement of blessedness seems to be extremely cheap: who does *not* know that nature exists? And why should we deprive the *vulgus* of the very trivial and undeniable knowledge of the existence of nature?

2*. Knowledge and Love of God*. – Both in the *Ethics* and in the TTP Spinoza repeatedly asserts that humanity’s *summum bonum* is the knowledge and love of God.[[112]](#footnote-112) Thus, in the fourth chapter of the TTP, Spinoza writes:

The idea of God dictates this: that God is our supreme good, *or* that the cognition and love of God is the ultimate end toward which all our actions ought to be directed. In spite of this, the man of the flesh [*homo carnalis*] cannot understand these things. To him they seem hollow [*vana*], because he has too meager a cognition of God, and he finds nothing in this highest good to touch, or eat, or affect the flesh.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Under the atheist readings, this passage seems to assert nothing more than that knowledge and love of the totality of *nature* is humanity’s highest good. Let’s assume for a moment that Spinoza’s love and knowledge of God is nothing but this kind of devoted love of nature. Still, we may wonder, why is the “man of the flesh” incapable of entering the naturalist club? We definitely eat, touch, and affect our flesh through interaction with nature. Why do these perfectly natural actions undermine our claim to be lovers of nature?

3. *The Tetragrammaton as indicating God’s Essence*. – In Chapter 13 of the TTP, Spinoza attempts to establish that obedience to God does not require adequate knowledge of God. To prove this claim he points out that the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – who were clearly obedient and pious, had no knowledge of God’s true name, the Tetragrammaton (Ex. 6:3). Spinoza then glosses:

Note that there is no name in Scripture except the Tetragrammaton which *makes known* the absolute essence of God[*Dei absolutam essentiam*], without relation to created things. And therefore, the Hebrews contend that only this name of God is peculiarly his, the others being common nouns. *And really* [*et revera*], the other names of God, whether they are substantives or adjectives, are attributes which belong to God insofar as he is considered in relation to created things or is manifested through them.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Notice that the ‘*et rever*a’ phrase in the fourth line of the passage discloses Spinoza’s *agreement* with the contention of “the Hebrews” that only the Tetragrammaton indicates God’s true essence.[[115]](#footnote-115) But how could an atheist – who denies God’s existence – tell us which name of God truly indicates the “absolute essence of God”? Spinoza clearly understands the Tetragrammaton, according to its Hebrew root, *haya* [*היה*], as indicating pure *existence*, or as expressing in one single word “the three times of existing.”[[116]](#footnote-116) In this way, Spinoza’s agreement with the so-called Hebrews’ understanding of the Tetragrammaton amounts to the claim that God’s essence is nothing but existence, a claim Spinoza explicitly asserts in the *Ethics* (E1p20). But if Spinoza is an atheist, i.e., denies God’s existence, why should he assert that God’s essence is existence, i.e., that God necessarily exists?

4. *The Seven Principles of Faith*. – In Chapter 14, Spinoza presents his seven principles of universal faith, principles that are necessary for obedience and public peace. Elaborating on these principles, Spinoza stresses that at “it doesn’t matter, as far as faith is concerned,” how precisely these principles are interpreted, and then provides a list of pairs of interpretations of such principles. Each pair consists of an anthropomorphic interpretation, consistent with the religion of the *vulgus*, and a philosophical, non-anthropomorphic, interpretation which represents Spinoza’s own views. Here are the pair of interpretations of principles [iii]-[v]:

Again, it also doesn’t matter, as far as faith is concerned, if

someone believes

[iii] that God is everywhere according to his essence or according to

his power, or

[iv] that he directs things from freedom or by a necessity of nature, or

[v] that he prescribes laws as a prince or teaches them as eternal truths.[[117]](#footnote-117)

In the case of principle [iii], the claim that God is everywhere according to his essence amounts to panentheism (or pantheism), while the claim that God is everywhere only according to his power is roughly the common providential conception of God as the omnipotent sovereign of all reality.[[118]](#footnote-118) But why would Spinoza suggest a philosophical, non-anthropomorphic conception of God as an alternative to the conception of the *vulgus*, if, qua atheist, he would reject it as well? What is the philosophical or political value of this move? Philosophically, the atheist is supposed to deny the very existence of God no matter whether he is everywhere by essence or by power, and no matter whether he directs all things freedom or from necessity. Politically, it would also be a folly for Spinoza to try to disguise himself as merely… a pantheist, i.e., radical heretic.

5. *“I Am the Lord Your God.”* – Addressing the first two commandments of the Decalogue which assert God’s existence and prohibit the worship of anything else (Ex. 20:2 and Duet. 5:6), Spinoza writes:

That’s also why the Decalogue was a law only in relation to the Hebrews, because of a defect in their knowledge. *For since they did not know God’s existence as an eternal truth, they had to perceive as a law what was revealed to them in the Decalogue: that God exists and that he alone is to be worshipped*. If God had spoken to them immediately, without using any corporeal means, they *would have perceived this, not as a law, but as an eternal truth*.[[119]](#footnote-119)

For Spinoza, perceiving something as an eternal truth is perceiving it truly and rationally. While perceiving a content as divine legislation is the result of anthropomorphic thinking and defective cognition.[[120]](#footnote-120) For our purposes, it is crucial that the passage above clearly asserts that God’s existence and “that he alone is to be worshiped” *can* be perceived also as eternal truths. But eternal truths are true and fully rational. Hence, we have clear evidence for a fully rational conception of God’s existence and of the requirement to “worship him alone.” What kind of atheist would assert that God’s existence and the requirement to worship him alone is such an absolutely obvious, eternal truth?

There are numerous other passages in the TTP that are hardly intelligible under the atheist readings,[[121]](#footnote-121) unless one engages in Strauss-style fanciful conspiracy theories which virtually divorce the text from its meaning. I can only invite the reader to open the book and simply read it slowly and carefully while considering whether it is possible to make sense of this text on the assumption that its author was an atheist.

Part 5: “The Rabbis”

In parts 3 and 4 we have studied a wide selection of key texts from both the *Ethics* and the TTP which could hardly be reconciled with the view of Spinoza as an atheist. Many more texts can be adduced, both from the aforementioned two books and from Spinoza’s other works and correspondence.[[122]](#footnote-122) It is now time to reconsider why we were led to the conjecture that Spinoza was an atheist in spite of the clear testimony of the texts (such as Spinoza’s elaborate and highly sophisticated proof of God’s existence at the beginning of the *Ethics*). There seemed to be two chief reasons that led us to the atheism conjuncture. On the one hand, we had the Straussian claim that insofar as Spinoza was a philosopher he *could* not genuinely assert the existence of God. This claim does not deserve a response because no argument was made to motivate it. Once the Straussian will launch an argument in support of the claim that a philosopher cannot assert the existence of God, there will a point in responding to it. Without a motivating argument, it is questionable whether the Straussian assertion is at all part of a philosophical discourse.

Another motivation to impute atheism to Spinoza was Nadler’s claim that Spinoza’s use of the term ‘God’ is utterly opposed to “what the Judeo-Christian religious tradition means by ‘God’.”[[123]](#footnote-123) I have argued before that the suggestion that there is a Judeo-Christian concept of God is both wrong and highly misleading. Here I wish to return to this issue and elaborate briefly.

Rabbinic Judaism never developed a definitive theology. According to Leon Roth, “dogmalessness [is] the only dogma in Judaism.”[[124]](#footnote-124) I would doubt even that. The most significant attempt to establish Jewish principles of faith was carried out by Maimonides in his “Preface to Chapter *Heleq*” and the thirteen principles delineated therein. The two most salient features of this attempt were its populist nature (i.e., it was meant to be propagated among the masses), and its colossal failure (these principles were accepted by some, explicitly rejected by many, and radically reinterpreted by others). With regard to the first feature, we may only note that a common joke among Maimonides scholars is that the real question regarding these principles is whether Maimonides believed in seven or only six of his thirteen principles. It is also worth stressing that Maimonides’ thirteen principles appeared in his early and popular Commentary on the Mishna, and that in his mature philosophical masterpiece, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides did not even bother to *mention* these principles.

In the absence of binding theological dogma, it is quite common to find within rabbinic literature widely diverse and even opposed views on numerous theological issues. The questions of anthropomorphism and pantheism/panentheism are no exceptions. I will focus on the two issues of (1) critique of anthropomorphism and (2) pantheism/panentheism, because it is precisely Spinoza’s views on these two issues which might seem to scholars unfamiliar with the rabbinic context as being far beyond the pale.

Mainstream early modern rabbinic and Kabbalistic figures recurrently endorsed Maimonides’ critique of anthropomorphic religion. Some of these *establishment* rabbinic figures would go as far as restrict divine knowledge of particulars[[125]](#footnote-125) and express sympathy toward and understanding of the denial of providence on the part of the “philosophers.”[[126]](#footnote-126) As both Leibniz and Warren Zev Harvey have separately noted, Spinoza’s iconoclastic attack on the assertion, that “all things were created for the sake of man and man that he might worship God,”[[127]](#footnote-127) is at least partly adopted from Maimonides’ *Guide*. Post-Maimonidean rabbinic sources were divided in their evaluation of these views of Maimonides.[[128]](#footnote-128) Let us turn now to the issue of panentheism.

Panentheistic views were common in rabbinic literature, and almost ubiquitous among the Kabbalists. In a celebrated responsum, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Ashkenazi (1656-1718), perhaps *the* leading Rabbinic authority in Europe at his time, had been asked to evaluate the legitimacy of the assertion – made by David Nieto, a local rabbi in London – that “God, may he be blessed and nature, and nature and God may he be blessed - are all one [השי״ת והטבע והטבע והשי״ת הכל אחד].” In his responsum, Ashkenazi admits that he cannot even understand the very posing of the question [“"ואני שמעתי ולא אבין תלונות העוררין עליו] since the identity of God and nature is a well-established principle of the Kabbalah [“חכמת האמת”].[[129]](#footnote-129) The most Ashkenazi could make of the bizarre complaint against the identification of God and nature is that such an identification might perhaps involve some odd idolatrous cult of particular physical items. Ashkenazi immediately rejected this suspicion, noting that it would be absurd to ascribe such gross cultism to a serious scholar and rabbi such as Nieto. Remarkably, *the suspicion that the identification of God and nature was a statement of – or a foil for – atheism did not even pass through Ashkenazi’s mind*, since he was acquainted with similar assertions by numerous pious and righteous kabbalists.[[130]](#footnote-130)

For the most part, medieval and early modern rabbinic figures had hardly any anxieties about endorsing panentheistic (and, occasionally, pantheistic) views. It is not only that physical nature was considered to be in God, but even human minds and souls were deemed part of God. Thus, Moshe De Leon, the editor (or author) of the *Zohar* argues that the punishment of sinners in the afterlife cannot be severe, since human spirits are in the most literal sense (“ממש”) in God, and self-infliction is cruel and unbefitting of God.[[131]](#footnote-131)

In Jewish Amsterdam of Spinoza’s time, we find Menashe ben Israel attempting to explain the human mind’s relation to the body as analogous to God’s relation to the world: “Our Rabbis of blessed memory said: just as God fills the entire world, so does the soul fill the entire body. What they meant by this saying is that just as God is *wholly in the entire world*, and *wholly* in every part of the world, so too the pure soul is wholly in the entire body, and wholly in every part of it.”[[132]](#footnote-132) In the printed edition of the Sabbath sermons of Rabbi Saul Mortera, one of Spinoza’s teachers in the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam, we find the midrashic formula “God is the place of the world, but the World is not His place [הוא מקומו של עולם ואין העולם מקומו]”[[133]](#footnote-133) stated repeatedly.[[134]](#footnote-134) As Scholem pointed out, this formula has been commonly considered a statement of panentheism.[[135]](#footnote-135)

Early modern rabbinic sources were barely afraid of panentheism. So much so, that Rabbi Yacov Yosef ha-Kohen of Polonne (1710-1782), one of the founders of the Hassidic movement, would bring rabbinic panentheism to its ultimate conclusion by suggesting that, truly, *every idol* is indeed divine since God is present in space in its *entirety*.[[136]](#footnote-136) Far from adhering to any imaginary concept of the non-immanent God of the “Judeo-Christian religious tradition,” early modern traditional Jewish sources exhibit a relatively wide range of such concepts. Many, perhaps even most, of these sources would express agreement with Spinoza that “whatever is, is in God,” and many of these sources would concur with Maimonides’ and Spinoza’s claim that anthropomorphic conceptions of God involve the mere assimilation of the true conception of God to the crude ways of thinking of the common people. If we are not in the business of denouncing (or praising) both Maimonides and the Kabbalists as atheists, we had better refrain from imputing atheism to Spinoza because of his surprising religious views.

Conclusion

Discussing Spinoza’s alleged atheism, Leo Strauss laments the change in the perception of Spinoza’s views of God. “While former generations publicly denounced Spinoza as an atheist, today it is almost a heresy to hint that.”[[137]](#footnote-137) More than anyone else, the person who was responsible for the late eighteenth-century change in the evaluation of Spinoza’s views of God, was Salomon Maimon (1753-1800). Responding to Jacobi’s charges that the Kabbalah is “undeveloped Spinozism” and that Spinozism is atheism, Maimon argues that “the Kabbalah is, in fact, nothing other than an *extension* of Spinozism.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Moreover, claims Maimon:

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, it should really be called *acosmic*.[[139]](#footnote-139)

According to Strauss, the change in the perception of Spinoza’s views of God occurred because “the causes of esoterism have almost completely been forgotten.”[[140]](#footnote-140) This claim is patently false at least with regard to Maimon, who was highly sensitive to the contemporary political context of writing about Spinoza.[[141]](#footnote-141) The source of the difference between Maimon’s and Strauss’ opposed views of Spinoza’s understanding of God lies elsewhere. Unlike Strauss, who had barely any access to rabbinic literature,[[142]](#footnote-142) Maimon was intimately versed in rabbinic and kabbalistic writing (in his early period, Maimon was a kabbalist). Thus, it is not a coincidence that the person who would initiate the revolution in the perception of Spinoza’s view of God had deep familiarity with the world of Kabbalah and rabbinics. From within that world, it is pretty absurd to assert that panentheism, or the assertion that “whatever is, is in God,” is atheism.

Before concluding, it would be eminently fitting for us to reflect briefly on the relationship between the TTP and the *Ethics* from the vantage point of the question of Spinoza’s “atheism.” According to Strauss, the *Ethics* “is a strictly esoteric or scientific” work, while the TTP “is, of course, exoteric.”[[143]](#footnote-143) The key for understanding the unstated and hidden foundations of the *Ethics*, says Strauss, are the exoteric, atheistic, teachings of the TTP.[[144]](#footnote-144) Jacobi sees no opposition between the two works (both assert atheism);[[145]](#footnote-145) Bayle and Lamy seem to concur.[[146]](#footnote-146) On my side, I can note that Spinoza’s extant letters provide us with valuable insight into the development and early drafts of the *Ethics*, which we barely have in the case of TTP. The *Ethics* was also written during a much longer period than the TTP. In terms of the content of the two books, there seem to be some interesting differences between the political and moral theories of the two books, but as far as the concept of God is concerned, I do not see a deep difference between the two works.[[147]](#footnote-147)

Addressing the narrow-minded strategy for imputing atheism to Spinoza, I have previously admitted that in this peculiar use of the term, Spinoza is indeed an atheist.[[148]](#footnote-148) In order to avoid confusion about the way we use the term, I suggest, we reserve ‘atheist\*’ for this early modern use of the term to describe aberrant religious behavior. At this point, I am ready for another disclosure. The author of the current piece is most humbly admitting the charge of being…an elephant (or more, precisely, an elephant\*). Please don’t be troubled by the question of designing a keyboard that would fit the muscles of elephant’s trunks. Nor should you wait to the work of future historians who might scrutinize the use of the term ‘elephant\*’ in some Baltimorean neighborhoods. I can openly tell you right now: elephants\* *need not* have trunks at all (a certain aberrant behavior would suffice for the acquisition of this noble title).

Perhaps the most fitting conclusion for this paper is encapsulated by Spinoza’s own words when he is finally willing to address the charge of atheism which he finds patently absurd. Having in mind the sophisticated demonstrations of God’s existence at the beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes: “Who can be so skillful and cunning that he can give, insincerely, so many and such strong arguments for a thing he regards as false? Who, I say, will he afterward think has written sincerely if he thinks fictions can be as solidly demonstrated as truths?” [[149]](#footnote-149)

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ADDITIONS:

- Check Holonmerism- pantheism./Moore/Newton. Emanuele: The presence of the whole Christ (human - body and blood - and divine) in each particle of the Eucharist was fully accepted in the Catholic catechism through the Tridentine Council (1551). This pronunciation of the Council is largely based on the discussion crystallized by Aquinas in the ST (Part III/Q75 and especially Q76), which is based loosely on some doctrines (respectively) on transmutation and wholeness from Aristotle's *Physics*. In particular, Aquinas states (Q76 a.3 *respondeo*):

- Add note Ep. 73/Kabbalah.

- Leibniz rejection of the view of God as the World-Soul – LC L2.12, LC L4.27,

- Skinner, 24 – “Mythology of parochialism” , but in the case of Western hegemony the parochial is never recognized as such.

1. “Only malice or lack of judgement could describe Spinoza’s teaching as ‘atheistic.’ No one has ever expressed himself more sublimely about the divinity than Spinoza.” Heine*, Zur Geschichte der Religion*, 51| *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Our Rabbis of blessed memory said: just as God fills the entire world, so does the soul fill the entire body. What they meant by this saying is that just as God is *wholly in the entire world*, and *wholly* in every part of the world, so too the pure soul is wholly in the entire body, and wholly in every part of it.” Menashe Ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayim*, 125. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, TTP Ch. 4| III/57/5. Unless otherwise marked, all quotes from Spinoza’s works and letters are from Curley’s translation. I have relied on Gebhardt’s critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 volumes (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925)) for the Latin and Dutch text of Spinoza. I would like to thank Warren Zev Harvey, Justin Bledin, Clare Carlisle, Zach Gartenberg, Dan Garber, Shai Grabie, Mogens Laerke, Jonathan Garb, and the late Ada Rapoport-Albert, for their helpful comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this paper. I am particularly grateful to Steven Nadler for clarifying some important issues in his writing, and for comments which, I hope, greatly improved the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the reactionary nature of the imputation of atheism by Spinoza’s contemporaries, see Garrett, *Nature and Necessity*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bayle, “Spinoza” in *Dictionary Historical & Critical*, vol. v, 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bayle, “Spinoza” in *Dictionary Historical & Critical*, vol. v, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lamy, *Le nouvel athéisme*, 34-72 and 235-7. Cf. Stetter, “François Lamy’s Cartesian Refutation,” 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. TP Ch. 3| III/277/19. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I discuss some of these TTP passages, in my “The Metaphysics of the *Theological Political Treatise*,” 133-7. Another important passage is TTP Ch. 6 (III/83 note). In the above article I do not distinguish between pantheism and panentheism. I will shortly spell out this important distinction in Part 1 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Or rather, merely, the secularist image of Western Christianity? The extent to which Western Christianity has been opposed to panentheism is a topic I cannot properly discuss in the current study, though I find Clare Carlisle’s challenge to this widely accepted view highly persuasive. See Carlisle, *Spinoza’s Religion*, preface. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Spinoza, Ep. 30| IV/166/25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Spinoza, TTP Ch. 2| III/29/32-30/4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Spinoza, Ep. 55 (October/November 1674)|IV/255/24-31. The translation in this quote is by Roth. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides*, 119. For Spinoza’s triangle example, see Ep. 56: “I believe that if a triangle could speak, it would say in the same way that God is triangular in an eminent way [*eminenter*]” (IV/260/6-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. When Boxel states that he believes in the existence of masculine, but not feminine, ghosts, Spinoza asks him whether he ever checked their underwear (Ep. 54| IV/251/12). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ep. 55| IV/256/7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For a clear example of such an attitude by a Kabbalist, see Joseph Ergas’ *Shomer Emunim*, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Curley, *Collected Works*, vol. II, 365. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ep. 42| IV/218/15-20. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ep. 42| IV/218/24-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. An early source I have not discussed in this part is the testimony of the Augustinian Friar, Tomas Solano y Robles. After a visit to Amsterdam in late 1658, Brother Tomas was interviewed by the Inquisition in Madrid, which was attempting to gather information on the community of the former *conversos* in Amsterdam. In his report, Tomas describes his meeting in Amsterdam with two outcasts of the Jewish community: Juan de Prado and Benedict de Spinoza. According to Brother Tomas, Spinoza (and De Prado) “thought that God exists only philosophically” (Revah, *Spinoza et Juan de Prado*, 32). Tomas describes De Prado as a physician and Spinoza as “a good philosopher.” Thus, I suspect that the claim about the “mere” philosophical existence of God was more closely associated with the philosopher between the two. But does it make sense for a philosopher to say that “God exists *only* philosophically,” thus implying that philosophical existence is *not* existence in the full sense of the word? By analogy, think about the testimony of a lay person who describes a philosopher of language as “quarrelling about the *mere* meaning of words.” A report of this latter kind seems to qualify as an indication that the lay person has hardly any clue about what kind of inquiry is conducted by philosophers of language. Returning to Brother Tomas, we know that Tomas describes Spinoza as an atheist, though he quotes the philosopher as claiming that God exists philosophically. Are we not witnessing here a case of a *vulgus*, misapprehending a conception of God that is free from anthropomorphic thinking? We can pose the same question from a slightly different angle. Assuming that Spinoza truly believed in the inexistence of God, why should he say that “God exists *only* philosophically”? Did he believe that philosophy does *not* provide an adequate account of existence? Finally, let me note that the oldest biography of Spinoza (commonly attributed to Lucas) stresses that Spinoza went through a relatively less severe form of *Herem*, since “he was not convicted of blasphemy [*blasphemé*], but only of want of respect for Moses and for the Law” (*Oldest Biography*, 53). Presumably, genuine atheism would count as blasphemy in seventeenth-century Jewish Amsterdam. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Voetius, *Disputantionum*, 116-126. Cf. Krop, “Atheismus,” 164-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See his preface to the 1657 Hebrew translation of Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Voetius, *Disputantionum*. Translated in Krop, “Atheismus,” 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In Ep. 43, Spinoza points out to Ostens that Descartes was accused of atheism by Voetius (IV/220/27). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kors, *Atheism in France*, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gautier, *Les grotesques*, 71. Translated in Kors, *Atheism in France*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Allen, *Doubt’s Boundless Sea*, vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ep. 43| IV/219/30-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. TTP Ch. 6| III/87/3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 233| *Werke*, I/1, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 233-4| *Werke*, I/1, 120-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 187 and 205| *Werke*, I/1, 18 and 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 234| *Werke*, I/1, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 189| *Werke*, I/1, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 233, n. 57| *Werke*, I/1, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Jacobi does not seem to have a reasonable grasp of what is happening in Parts Four and Five of the *Ethics*. In a rare reference to these parts, Jacobi dismisses them as texts in which Spinoza hides his real views and “degrades himself into sophistry” (Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 194| *Werke*, I/1, 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “Underlying Strauss’ argument in *Philosophie und Gesetz* is his belief, inherited from Jacobi, that there is an irreconcilable contradiction between revelation and reason” (Warren Zev Harvey, “Historiography of Jewish Philosophy”). On Maimonides’ atheism per Strauss, see Kremer, “Medieval Arabic Enlightenment,” 138. On Strauss’ view of Locke as atheist, see Zuckert, “Strauss Return to Premodern Thought,” 97-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Harvey aptly notes that Strauss’ tertulianism “was unprecedented in the historiography of Jewish philosophy” reason (Warren Zev Harvey, “Historiography of Jewish Philosophy”). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. A Straussian would most likely suggest that one should not even *ask* for such an argument since atheism is a philosophical truth that should not be taught exoterically. I will let the prudent reader – who should also consider Strauss’ overall aptitude in analyzing arguments – reach her own verdict on the value of this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Strauss, *Persecution*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. CM II 8| I/264/13. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ep. 12a. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For another variant of this strategy, see Smith, *Spinoza’s Book of Life*, 42-3, who also follows Strauss’ path. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Nadler is clearly not the only one to suggest this alleged contrast between Spinoza’s God and “the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition.” See, for example, Bennett, *Study*, 35. My criticism below is directed *mutatis mutandis* toward Bennett (and others who make similar claims) as well. Claire Carlisle rightly pointed out to me that the expression employed by Nadler, “ontologically distinct,” is ambiguous, and can mean either, not overlapping with *x*, or alternatively, not being identical with *x*. In the latter sense of ‘distinct,’ Spinoza’s God *is* distinct from the modes. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Responding to Maimonides’ claim that whoever believes that God is corporeal is a heretic, Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquières, one of the most prominent rabbinic commentators on Maimonides’ *Code* writes: “Why did Maimonides call such a person a heretic? Better and more important scholars [than Maimonides] adhered to the view that God is corporeal” (see his commentary on Maimonides, *Mishne Torah,* Book of Science, Laws of Repentance, Ch. 3, §. 7). Importantly, Avraham ben David himself did not believe that God is corporeal, but thought it was improper to delegitimize such views. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See, for example, TTP Ch. 2 (III/35/16-20, 37/33-38/21, 42/6-13, 42/26-32) and Ch. 13 (III/169/24-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Baba Bathra, 25b. I am indebted to Jonathan Garb for pointing out this source. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Zohar*, III 225a (Ra’aya Meheymana). Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Cordovero, *Shiur Koma*, 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Herrera, *Gates of Heaven*, Book II, Ch. 1. According to the kabbalistic doctrine of the *zimzum* (divine self-limitation) – propagated the prominent sixteenth century Safed Kabbalist, Isaac Luria – the *Ein-Sof* (the Infinite) limited itself before creation in order to make it possible for something that is not *Ein-Sof* to exist. The exact meaning of this doctrine was subject to a fierce dispute among early modern Kabbalists (and indeed is still debated today among contemporary Kabbalists). This dispute was closely related to the issue of pantheism, since a *literal* interpretation of the doctrine (*צמצום כפשוטו*) allowed for the existence of a locus that is not occupied by the *Ein-Sof*. Herrera was one of the prominent early advocates of the *metaphorical* interpretation of the *zimzum* (*צמצום שלא כפשוטו*), thus, asserting that truly *there is no space* devoid of God (See Herrera, *Gates of Heaven*, Book 2, Ch. 2, and book 8, Ch. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See Idel, “*Deus sive Natura*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See E1p18d. Cf. Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 61-66, and Garrett, “Spinoza’s *Conatus* Argument, 157 n. 31, and Nadler, “Whatever is,” 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See E1p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Kant’s use of the term in the First *Critique* is close – though not identical – to the twentieth century sense: “We will define the principles whose application stay wholly and completely within the limits of human experience **immanent**, but those that would fly beyond these boundaries **transcendent** principles” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B352). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See the *Oxford Dictionary & Thesaurus*: “transcendent – adj. (1) excelling; surpassing (*transcendent merit*). (2) transcending human experience. (3) *Philos*. *a* higher than Aristotle’s ten categories in scholasticism. *b* not realizable in experience in Kantian philosophy. (4) (esp. of the supreme being) existing apart from, not subject to the limitations of the material universe (opp. IMMANENT)” (p. 1623). Sense (3)a is irrelevant to our discussion. Our use of the term is mostly related to senses (2), (3)b, and (4). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. “E2a5: We neither feel nor perceive any singular things except bodies and modes of thinking.” [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. See Eps. 64 and 66. For a detailed explanation, see Melamed, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*, 156-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Notably, Jacobi claimed that Spinoza could not be serious in asserting that God has infinitely many attributes (or any attributes beyond thought and extension) (Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 357). Once one denies the reality of the infinitely many attributes, it becomes much easier to assert the non-transcendence of Spinoza’s God. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. TTP CH. 6| III/83/10. Spinoza’s distinction is merely similar, but not identical, to the one I draw above, since he considers ‘nature’ in its narrow sense to be referring only to Extension, while my ‘natureOurs’ refers to Extension and Thought (i.e., ideas representing Extension). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Gueroult stresses the very same point: “… la Nature, à la quelle Dieu est identifié, n’est pas la matière, mais comprend dans son unité indivisible, outre l’Etendue, essence indivisible des corps, une infinité d’autres genres d’être” (Gueroult, *Spinoza I*, 223). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Shortly, I will show that the absolute infinity of *Deus sive Natura*Ours is grounded in Spinoza’s definition of *God* (rather than the concept of nature which is not defined in the *Ethics* and is quite marginal in the proofs of Part One of the *Ethics*). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The terms ‘pantheism’ and ‘panentheism’ were coined by Toland (*Socinianism truly stated*) and Krause (*Gewissheit*), respectively. For a detailed discussion of the distinction between pantheism and panentheism, see Melamed, “Cohen, Spinoza, and the Nature of Pantheism,” and Melamed, “Concise Grammar of Pantheism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Regrettably, both I (in my *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*) and Nadler did not distinguish pantheism from panentheism. For Gueroult’s view of Spinoza as a panentheist (rather than a pantheist), see Geuroult, *Spinoza I*, 220 and 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. In correspondence, Nadler clarifies that he “does not think Spinoza modified his language in the Ethics to engage in political niceties,” or in other words that he does not accept the Straussian strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See Ep. 73 (IV/307/5-6): “I favor an opinion concerning God and Nature *far different* from the one Modern Christians usually defend.” Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 119-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Interestingly, Bennet, of all people, argues that Spinoza viewed “Nature as a fit object for reverence, owe, and humble love” (*Study*, 34) [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Though, like Maimonides, he would allow worship of the anthropomorphic God as an accommodation to the psychology of the masses. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See, for example, *Mishna*, *Tractate Avot*, I 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See Maimonides, *Preface to Chapter Heleq* in *Haqdamot le-Perush ha-Mishna*, 113-117, and *Mishne Torah,* Book of Science, Laws of Repentance, Ch. 10, §§ 1-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Spinoza entertains a similar attitude in his discussion of the seven dogmas of universal faith (TTP Ch. 14| III/177-179). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. “Since not all human beings are capable of apprehending the truth, and thus reaching the rank of Abraham, our father, it was *permitted* for the multitude to perform the commandment out of mere of hope for reward and fear of punishment.” Maimonides, *Preface to Chapter Heleq* in *Haqdamot le-Perush ha-Mishna*, 116-117. Italics added. The translation is mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. For an insightful discussion of the Awe of Sublimity in the ethics of Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzato (1707-1746), see Garb, “From Fear to Awe in Luzzatto’s *Mesilat Yesharim.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 114-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 120. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. See E2a5. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. For a detailed critique of Bennett’s claim that Spinoza is not committed to the existence of any attributes beyond Extension and Thought, see Melamed, “Substance Consisting of an Infinity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. See Melamed, “Crescas and Spinoza on Infinity,” 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. For the *Ethics* passage, see E1p17s (II/62/35-63/4). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ep. 54| IV/253/5-11. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. As well shall shortly see, Spinoza does not allow us to speak of ‘GOD-SANS-SPECK’ since God is indivisible (E1p12). Spinoza does speak frequently of ‘parts of nature.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Ak. 5:248. Emphases in origin. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Part II, §9. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Melamed, “Eternity in Early Modern Philosophy,” 152-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *Cogitata Metaphysica*, I, 10| I/270/17-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Cogitata Metaphysica*, I, 1| I/252/18. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Nadler, “Whatever is,” 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Nadler, *Spinoza’s* Ethics, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Cf. Nadler, “Whatever is,” 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. I am not aware of any other text in Spinoza’s corpus in which he provides a definition of ‘nature’ *simpliciter*. In E1p29s, he defines and distinguishes *natura naturans* from *natura naturata*, and roughly the same distinction appears in KV I, 8 (I/47/20) as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. See, for example, Ep. 30 (IV/166/13). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. For a penetrating critique of the claim that Spinoza’s first proof in E1p11d is a mere restatement of Anselm’s ontological proof, see Garrett, “Spinoza’s ‘Ontological’ Argument.” [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Strauss, *Persecution*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. According to Strauss, the *Ethics’* arguments for God’s existence are merely meant “*ad captum vulgi loqui*” (*Persecution*, 189). Frankly, Strauss’ *vulgus* seems to easily outsmart Strauss himself, who shows no traces of genuine understanding of the arguments at the beginning of Part One of the *Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. In contrast, Spinoza would argue that the essence of a thing is both necessary *and sufficient* for the “givenness” of a thing. See E2d2 and the end of E2p13s. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Cf. E1a4 and E2p45d. I discuss this issue in detail in my review of Ayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Ultimately, the danger here is anthropomorphizing God, i.e., conceiving God in the image of (the best) finite thing we know. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. I have slightly amended Curley’s translation, rendering ‘*cognitio*’ as ‘cognition’ rather than ‘knowledge,’ since Spinoza allows for inadequate *cognitio*. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. E2p10s| II/93/30-94/4. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. See E1p12d, CM II 5 (I/258/16), and Ep. 35 (IV/181/24). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. TTP Ch. 2| III/30/2-5. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. TTP Ch. 5| III/78/8-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. See E2p40s2| II/123/11. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. See, for example, E4p28, E4app4, E5p20d, and TTP Ch. 4 (III/60). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. TTP Ch. 4| III/61/3-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. TTP Ch. 13| G III/169/7-18. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Cf. III/169/8 and 25. For a detailed discussion of this passage, see Melamed, “Spinoza’s Deification of Existence,” 84-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. TTP Ch. 2| III/38/25. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. TTP Ch. 14| III/178/20-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Cf. Descartes’ 1649 letter to More: “I think that God is everywhere in virtue of his power; yet in virtue of his essence he has no relation to place at all” (AT V 343| CSM III 373). [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. TTP Ch. 4| III/63/27-33. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See Melamed, “Spinoza Against the Law.” [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. See, for example, TTP Ch. 6, Adn. 6 and Ch. 14 (III/179/20-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. One such text which I have briefly mentioned before is Spinoza’s discussion in Chapter 3 of his late and incomplete work, the *Tractatus Politicus*, where atheism is referred to as an example of an absurd belief (next to the belief that the whole is not greater than its part) which even the most powerful sovereign *cannot* force one to affirm (III/287/19. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Some of my claims in this part rely on the preliminary conclusion of a joint book project I have been pursing recently with Jonathan Garb on the history of pantheism and panentheism in rabbinic thought from 1200 to 1970. Broadly speaking, our tentative conclusion is that pantheistic, and even more so panentheistic, views are quite prevalent in rabbinic writing and that the very few attacks on such views in the rabbinic context ended almost uniformly with a clear victory on the side of the panentheists. The Nieto affair discussed briefly below is one of these few controversies (and it too ended with the vindication of the assertion that God and nature are one and the same). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Roth, “Fundamentalism and Judaism,” 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. See Ergas, *Shomer Emunim*, 92a. *Shomer Emunim* is one of the most canonical and mainstream texts of the Kabbalah. In 1756, a major ban was announced, prohibiting the study of Kabbalah before the age of forty. Only three texts were excluded from this ban, and *Shomer Emunim* was one of them. The fact that the book restricts divine knowledge of particulars did not stopped it from being designated a canonical text, beyond suspicion. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. See Kahana and Silber, “Deists, Sabbateans, and Kabbalists,” 357 and 362. The author of this sermon is Ezekiel Landau, the chief rabbi of Prague and one of the most important rabbinic authorities of the eighteenth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. The quote appears in Leibniz’s marginalia on the *Guide*. See Goodman, “Maimonides and Leibniz,” 233. For Spinoza’s claims, see E1app| II/79. Cf. Harvey, “Spinoza and Maimonides,” and Melamed, “Teleology in Jewish Philosophy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Compare, for example, the views of Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov, Crescas, and Ibn Gabbai (Melamed, “Teleology in Jewish Philosophy,”131-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Ashkenazi, *Shut Hakham Zvi*. Question 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Ashkenazi, *Shut Hakham Zvi*, Question 18. As far as I can tell, medieval theological anxieties about pantheism did not consider it atheistic, but rather as constituting, or leading to, idolatry (see, for example, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 4, objection 1). Notably, in the rabbinic context, even in the modern period, the few critiques of pantheism/panentheism charged it with idolatry, not atheism. See, for example, the 1796 attack of Rabbi Elijah of Vilnius against the panentheism of the Hassidim (Wilenski, *Hassidim u‑Mitnagdim*, 188). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Moshe De Leon, *Mishkan ha-Edut*, part 4, quoted in Eliyahu ha-Kohen, *Midrash Talpiot*, 81a. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Menashe Ben Israel, *Nishmat Hayim* (1652), 125. Italics added. I have used this quote as one of the mottos of the current paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 68:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Mortera, *Givat Shaul*, 61, 142, 143, and 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Scholem, “Kabbalah,” 649. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Yakov Yosef ha-Kohen of Polonne, *Ben Porat Yosef*, 99a. *Ben Porat Yosef* is the second Hassidic book to be printed (1782). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Strauss, *Persecution*, 189-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Maimon, *Autobiography*, 58. I leave the discussion of that point for another occasion, [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Maimon, *Autobiography*, 64. Maimon coined the term “acosmism” as the proper description of Spinoza’s philosophy in response to the common eighteenth-century imputation of atheism to Spinoza. This view of Spinoza as a radical religious thinker who denies the reality of the world and asserts that only God exists helped initiate a major revolution in the perception of Spinoza among the German Idealists. Maimon himself had espoused a version of acosmism in his early Hebrew manuscript, *Hesheq Shelomo* (e.g., folio 139). See Melamed, “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism,” 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Strauss, *Persecution*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Maimon discusses exoteric and esoteric writing in the context of Mendelssohn’s and Leibniz’s attempts to distance themselves from any association with Spinoza, See Melamed, “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism,” 86-7 and 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. According to a story I have heard orally from multiple sources (though I have never seen it in writing), Nehama Leibowich, who would later become a leading bible scholar, was Strauss’ study mate at the Berlin *Hochschule* in the 1920s. At the time, Leibowich was an undergraduate student, while Strauss had finished his Ph.D. and acquired a reputation of being a highly promising future “Jewish philosopher.” After a few sessions in which the two studied Talmud together, Leibowich is reported to have asked her friends who precisely is Strauss: “He must be a great philosopher” Leibowich is reported to say, “since in Talmud, he does not understand the basics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Strauss, *Persecution*, 186-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Strauss, *Persecution*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 201| *Werke*, I/1, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. See the introduction to this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Two important and relevant issues which I have not addressed in this paper are (1) the role of religion in Spinoza’s well-functioning state and society, and (2) Spinoza’s attitude toward historical religions. On both issues, the story seems to be somewhat more complicated than the common, textbook tale. Here I can recommend, among others, the important work of Carlisle (*Spinoza’s Religion*), Garber (“Politics of Obedience” and his contribution to this volume), and Harvey (“Spinoza and Maimonides on True Religion”). [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. See parts 2 and 3 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Ep. 43| IV/220/24-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)