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ARTICLE

Cambridge Platonism and the Reception of Spinoza in 17th-century England

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Abstract: This article examines the reception of Spinoza's philosophy in seventeenth-century England, focusing on Henry More and Anne Conway within the circle of the Cambridge Platonists. Taking as its point of departure Spinoza's claim that the human mind

possesses an adequate idea of God which nevertheless often remains inoperative, the paper reconstructs how his immanent monism was interpreted as atheism, enthusiasm, or mysticism. Drawing on the historiographical work of Rosalind Colie (1963) and Sarah Hutton (1984), we revisit the circulation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the early manuscript versions of the *Ethics*, arguing that Conway's *Principles* constitutes one of the earliest sustained engagements with Spinoza in English. By analyzing More's defense of divine transcendence and Conway's reflections on inspiration, imagination, and moral transformation, we show that their critiques implicitly address the operative force of ideas in shaping behavior. The seventeenth-century debate over Spinozism thus anticipates contemporary discussions in the cognitive science of religion concerning imagination, affect, and the regulation of belief.

Keywords: Spinoza, Anne Conway, Cambridge Platonism, Immanent monism, Religious cognition.

Introduction

The term “Cambridge Platonists” designates a group of seventeenth-century English thinkers—most prominently Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth, Anne Conway, and Henry More—whose philosophical project combined elements of ancient Platonism, Christian theology, and early modern metaphysics. Although they did not constitute a formal school, they shared a common commitment to defending the intelligibility of reality, the objectivity of moral values, and the compatibility of reason and religion in a period marked by the rise of mechanism, religious conflict, and skepticism.

The designation “Platonists” is due to their doctrinal affinities with the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. First, the Cambridge thinkers endorse a robust form of metaphysical realism grounded in the existence of immaterial and intelligible principles. Against Hobbesian materialism and Cartesian dualism in its more mechanistic interpretations, they argue that reality cannot be

exhaustively explained in terms of extended substance and motion. Instead, they posit the existence of incorporeal entities—souls, spirits, etc. —that mediate between God and the material world (cf. Goetz & Taliaferro, 2021, p. 310-312). This commitment reflects the central Platonic thesis that the sensible world depends upon intelligible structures which are not reducible to it.

Cambridge Platonists also adopt a participatory conception of knowledge and being, directly inspired by the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition. Human reason is understood as a finite participation in the divine intellect, which allows for different degrees of genuine, though limited, access to truth. This idea of degrees of epistemological participation is inseparable from their theological commitments; hence, to know the truth is to partake, in some degree, in the divine *logos*, such that all levels of reality emanate from and remain ontologically dependent upon a higher principle. Although the Cambridge Platonists resist a full doctrine of emanation, preferring to preserve divine transcendence, their insistence on continuity between divine and human reason places them firmly within a broadly Platonic metaphysical framework. It is this combination of metaphysical immaterialism and epistemological participation that explains why the Cambridge Platonists can be classified as Platonists in a substantive sense. Their project is best understood as a selective appropriation and transformation of Platonic themes within the context of early modern debates. Against this Platonic background—particularly their commitment to the intelligibility of the divine and to the participation of the human mind in it—their encounter with Spinoza's monism generates an important philosophical debate. The tension between the two frameworks becomes especially visible when we consider the status and efficacy of the idea of God in human cognition.

Spinoza in E2p47 claims that the human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God, but in E5p36s he says that although we know by reason that everything depends on God, this proof does not affect the mind. This inoperative character of the adequate - and innate - idea of god is contrasted with a general

tendency for imagining God inadequately, a kind of imagination that strikes the mind more often (Garver, 2018). In *Ethics* part 5, a key mechanism for the development of one's freedom is to reorganize the ideas of affects with the aid of imagination so that the ideas of the mind are related to the adequate idea of God. The result is that the adequate idea of the eternal and infinite essence of God becomes operative, affecting the individual, that is, the body-mind complex as a whole. Adequately imagining God is thought as a strategy for operating transformations in social behavior.

For Spinoza, the mind more commonly imagines god as an anthropomorphic being, a ruler that rewards and punishes, and as an all-knowing being with teleological intentions for every creature. However, the eternal and infinite essence of god is not that, but a single self-created substance that has infinite attributes, an idea which is apprehended by the mind as a substance composed of two of these attributes, thought and extension, that infinitely changes itself into finite modes. God, that is, nature, is a single substance in which we all inhere or are a part of in some sense or another - interpreters could never come to terms with how to best describe this relationship, as we know. Within the controversy and the possible lines of interpretation, which can be very different from each other, it is safe to say that Spinoza's naturalism is also the defense of an immanent monism.

Intellectual circles of 17th-century Europe rejected the idea that god is nature, considering it atheistic and mystical (Bayle, 1697). They imagined God differently. The consequences of an immanent monism to religious belief, to morality, and as a metaphysical foundation were a source of debate for the Cambridge Platonists, a group of English philosophers from the seventeenth century who were impacted by Spinoza's notion of God. Today we see a lively retrieval of the Cambridge Platonists (considered by Richard Popkin to be a third force in early modern Philosophy, the first being rationalism and the second empiricism), a recent recovery of their contributions to the early modern historiography of philosophy due to the recognition of the importance of Anne Conway as a

seventeenth-century woman metaphysician of the Cartesian, Hobbesian, and Spinozan circles.

Building upon the work of Rosalind Colie (1963) and Sarah Hutton (1984) on the reception of Spinoza's ideas in England, we will address the problem of the idea of God and its effects on behavior as they appear in the Cambridge Platonists. We would like to note here that Jonathan Israel's 2023 book on *Spinoza, Life and Legacy*, builds on the work of Colie but does not cite Anne Conway and her work as part of the English reception, a notorious absence given contemporary debates. Here, we will limit our analysis to the cases of Henry More and Anne Conway because More and Conway were explicit in criticizing Spinoza, having built their philosophies to counter Spinoza's concept of God, which they deemed a kind of mysticism and atheism. We will concentrate more on Anne Conway's criticism since she is the least studied in this context.

The purpose of this investigation is twofold: to expand the interpretative horizons of Spinoza's studies, of Cambridge Platonism, and to set the stage for research on how this discussion on the relationship between the idea we have of god and its consequences in behavior can inform current studies on the cognitive sciences of religion. It is not our goal to defend Spinoza against his critics, nor are we interested in defending the critics' view. Our goal is to reconstruct the debate, resetting the stage for an open, still contemporary, and important philosophical discussion.

1. Spinoza's Reception in England: Colie (1963) and Hutton (1984)

Rosalind Colie, in a seminal 1963 paper, describes Spinoza's reception as marked by an England armed against atheism. Understood as an extreme "Hobbist", Spinoza contributed to the secularization of thought, forcing institutionalized religion criticism and strengthening metaphysical reflection as a foundation for theological discussions. The first Englishmen to read Spinoza were "those theologians deeply involved in the intellectual crisis of the late

17th century, the Platonists of Cambridge" (Colie, 1963, p.3). This reception is mostly centered around the publication of the *TTP* and, according to Colie, follows this given sequence of events: the *TTP* is published in 1670, then in 1671, Phillipus van Limborch, a Dutch Remonstrant (a sect of the protestant movement, that caused a split in the Dutch reformed church at the time), so van Limborch sent the *TTP* to Oliver Doiley¹ - a law student at Cambridge University and later vice-provost of King's College—, and to Henry Jenkes², a Cambridge Fellow. Doiley and Jenkes have exchanged letters with Phillipus van Limborch upon receiving the *TTP*. Van Limborch sends the book to Doiley, describing it as a 'pestilential' book from a reckless, blasphemous author, and calling his attention to the need to prevent uneducated people from reading it. Doiley replies by sending another book (by Bishop Cumberland), which is supposed to be "an antidote to the poison of that *Theological Political Treatise* which is full of Hobbesian errors". Doiley and Jenkes also exchange letters on the general disapproval of Spinoza's treatise in England, and its "careful condemnation". Neither Doiley nor Jenkes wrote refutations to Spinoza, but other Cambridge men, like Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, did it later, engaging with Spinoza's critique of revealed religion and the authenticity of the scripture, the nature of God and Christ. It seems that Henry More was one of the learned men from Cambridge considered fit to read Spinoza.

This is Rosalind Colie's story. However, Hutton (1984), some twenty years after the publication of Colie's paper, shows that there is an earlier moment in this timeline, and that Spinoza was known in England even before the publication of the *TTP* in 1670: the existence of the important correspondence between Spinoza and Henry Oldenburg (who was German but went to London in 1650's living as a diplomat and as a member of the Royal Society). And according to their correspondence that begins in 1661, Spinoza describes his reasons for writing the *TTP* (so the reception begins before its publication) and discusses charges of atheism against him while

¹ On this exchange, see <https://spinozaweb.org/people/317>.

² Notes can also be found here <https://spinozaweb.org/people/372>.

defending the liberty to philosophize. Although the *Ethics* was only published posthumously in 1677, it was written between 1661 and 1675, and many of its parts were shared through the Spinoza-Oldenburg correspondence. Whether the letter's contents spread beyond Oldenburg is unknown, but it is certain that Spinoza's name circulated in England before the publication of the *TTP*.

Considering the dates Anne Conway composed the *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (published in 1690 but written a few years before she died in 1679), it is very likely that her work is one of the first books in the English language that directly cites and engages with Spinoza's philosophy. Certainly, the first one written by a woman philosopher. This fact (that it is the first writing on Spinoza by a woman) becomes a historiographical difficulty because Coudert & Corse, in their introduction to Conway's *Principles*, consider that when she herself claims to be rejecting Spinozism, she is actually engaging against the accusation of atheism and is not specifically refuting Spinoza's philosophy. Coudert & Corse go along with Pierre Bayle in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, when explaining that most of the time authors of the 17th century who were saying they were refuting Spinoza were not actually discussing his philosophy, but just offering criticisms against atheism in general.

To construct a picture of the kind of Spinozism (or the share of Spinoza's philosophy) the Cambridge Platonists were engaging with (in the early days of the publication of the *TTP*) and were available to them, we should also consider Spinoza's correspondence as a source of reconstruction of those available theses. For example, it is through the correspondence that Moreau reconstructs the dates of composition of the *Ethics* and the *TTP*, figuring out which theses had been composed when. And it is through this reconstruction that Melamed can argue for the *TTP* as a laboratory of Spinoza's metaphysical theses.

It is in letter 6 to Oldenburg that Spinoza states: "I do not separate God from nature as everyone known to me has done". Also, in the first letters written to Oldenburg in 1661, Spinoza refers to two works

he had already completed (the *Short Treatise* and the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*) and states that he is writing a longer, more complete work in which he expounds his entire philosophy. Spinoza calls this work “my philosophy”. In another moment of his correspondence with Oldenburg, Spinoza tells him that there is a group of friends, organized around Simon de Vries, discussing the fragments of his “my philosophy”. Spinoza’s reference to “my philosophy” is usually interpreted as a reference to an early manuscript of the *Ethics*. In a letter to Bouwmeester (1665) Spinoza says he is already composing the third part of the *Ethics* (and had written until proposition 80), and the letter to Blijenbergh (also from around 1665), where, by then, Spinoza starts calling this manuscript “*Ethics*”. It was around 1665 that Spinoza was writing propositions 36-37 of part IV.

According to Moreau’s reconstruction of the dates of composition of the *Ethics* (*Spinoza et le spinozisme*, 63), it is at this moment that Spinoza stops writing the *Ethics* and starts composing the *Tractatus* (which is written in the course of five years, from 1665 until 1670). Until 1665, there was a first version of the *Ethics*’ manuscript (which Moreau calls “*Ethica A*”), divided into at least three parts and named “my philosophy”. Spinoza finishes this manuscript around 1675 and goes to Amsterdam to try to publish it but gives up from fear of the reception (letters 62, letters 68). The final version or the “*Ethica B*” is published only in the *Opera Posthuma*. These dates show that even before the *Tractatus*, a version of the manuscript of the *Ethics* was already circulating in the intellectual community of the six hundreds. Even if we consider the circulation to have been restricted to the circle of Spinoza’s friends (including, for example, Lodewijk Meijer), we can see that he used to rewrite and summarize some sets of propositions of the *Ethics* in his letters. For this reason, parts of the manuscript or summaries of the content of the early version of the *Ethics* then circulated much more widely. It is very likely that intellectuals from the Cambridge circle, including Conway, had access, if not to the whole manuscript of the *Ethics*, to parts or summaries written by Spinoza himself throughout his correspondence.

In terms of content, Melamed (2010) shows that an analysis of the *TTP* can also tell us about the development of Spinoza's metaphysical doctrines, especially the identity of God's essence and existence, the notions of substance and attributes, and the identity between God and nature. Although there is nowhere in the *Tractatus* where Spinoza asserts the identity of God and nature, Melamed shows that there are two passages which strongly suggest this identity: chapter IV (the claim that the more we know natural things, the greater and more perfect is the knowledge of God, a claim that also appears in E1p1def6) and chapters XIII and XIV (where Spinoza argues that God's essence is his existence and that God, according to his essence, is everywhere). These ideas alone allow for the claims of atheism and enthusiasm that are central to More and Conway; but the fact that they focus their criticism on theses that are central to the *Ethics* indicates that perhaps they had access to copied versions of the manuscript through exchange of letters.

2. Henry More: Monism as Atheism

Henry More³ wrote two anti-Spinozist works *Demonstrationum duarum propositionum... confutatio e Epistola altera*, both published in his *Opera Omnia* in 1679. The *Epistola Altera* (written in 1677, published in 1679) was the first book-length refutation of Spinoza, containing a reconstruction of the theses of the *TTP* and in the scholia one can find notes on Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma*. There we can find his own refutation of Spinoza (specially the argument on how, in chapters XIII-XV, Spinoza is destroying the foundations of faith) and his defense of God as a transcendent moral agent. Henry More was writing against the background of the Reformation and looking to find the principles of an ethical Christian life. Along with other Cambridge Platonists, he considered that philosophy and theology were well matched and reason could help on matters of faith.

³ Colie notes that More's ideas on substance were available to Spinoza, who owned Glazemaker's Dutch translation of Descartes' correspondence which included Descartes' letter exchange with Henry More.

According to Vermeir (2008), in the *An Explanation of the Grant Mystery of Godliness* (1660) More conceived of two kinds of atheism, the Aristotelian and the Epicurean. According to the Aristotelian view, all miracles and abstract entities like apparitions and ghosts are the effects of the imagination. On the Epicurean, he pointed out that the denial of incorporeal principles in the explanations of nature - like those that accepted mechanical explanations - would have impious implications. More was on a quest against atheism, but also against the false religion of enthusiasts. In the *Enthusiasmums Triumphatus*, More criticizes famous historical figures who considered themselves to be inspired by God and led to sectarianism, shunning away from true religion. Although More locates Spinoza's *TTP* on the atheism of the second kind, the Epicurean, Spinoza was also considered a true atheist—meaning that he could fit both descriptions and even the accusation of enthusiasm (or mysticism).

More's critique is connected with his own defense of spiritualism. He did not accept the notion of an immanent god and of an identification between God and nature for, otherwise, God could be explained by mechanical laws just as nature could – in principle – be. And More, as a critical of mechanicism, does not think that nature can be explained in mere causal terms.

We can see from More's own writings:

"I must admit that it has always seemed to me to be quite a miracle indeed that matter, though in itself stupid and devoid of all life, should from its own bosom pour forth substantial forms or living substances endowed with sense, imagination, memory and great wit and sagacity. Or, that although it is not essential life, but some entirely inert, stupid and merely passive subsistence, it should immediately from itself stir such operations as I have just mentioned without any impulse from without."(p. 97).

"I have already given abundant evidence in my writings of how incapable matter is of having perceptive life, i.e. sensation, imagination and memory, let alone the works of reason."

And then he concludes:

“There must necessarily be something superior to matter doing all these things. And assuming it were true, all of the natural atoms would need to have the same power and wisdom. Hence, all of them would know both which of the ends and uses of the whole fabric of a living being and of its single parts were the more noble and more desirable ones, and which were the less noble and less desirable. It would be surprising indeed if there arose no quarrel amongst them about their place and order or if they did not seek to grow together in such a way as would make the one wage war on all the others. Consequently, it would again be necessary that there was something superior to matter commanding this multitude of countless natural atoms of matter, setting them all in order.” (p. 100)

More argued in defense of a providential god, an infinite spirit that is immaterial, but has causal powers and acts by means of his intelligence. But More’s spiritualism entails not only that God is immaterial but that there are spirits in each and every natural object, explaining their movements. More then believes in witchcraft and spirits that exist independently from matter (Vermeir, 2008); he certainly defended the existence of miracles, and here it is him referring to Spinoza:

As to the second, it is obviously due to his lacking the power of natural light that Spinoza denies miracles to have been wrought by a supernatural power and that he believes the appearances of angels to have been mere figments of the prophets and patriarchs imagination. For in these matters, the history of the Scriptures is so perfect and plain that no proposition or proof in Euclid could have been put forward with any greater clarity and lucidity. It is due to his lacking the power of natural light, then, that Spinoza does not understand the divine truth from such places in the Holy Writ, but instead interprets them wrongly owing to the immersion of his wretched soul in the lowly body and on account of his arrogance and infatuation with false philosophy ” (*Epistola Altera*, p.36).

For More, reason should investigate spirits as spirits - which included the study of demonology and the workings of witchcraft. Pure superstition, Spinoza would say.

According to More, as we have seen, God is transcendent to the world, and as a moral agent committed to univocal goodness, God is able to reveal himself to prophets and to intervene in natural and human affairs. The prophets have a “boniform faculty” that, before language or discursive reasoning, acts as an internal sense and is able to grasp the universal goodness of God. This is the soul’s innate epistemic power of knowing God and his designs, but to be “activated”, it depends on God acting upon the prophet “as he sees fit”. There are various ways according to which God acts, so providence and god’s care may or may not happen, being sort of independent from man’s rational grasp of it as well as from obedience to God.

The boniform faculty is the measure of all subsequent cognition. It is a faculty situated between God and soul; it is the form of the good acting on the soul, moving the soul. It approves of reasoning and helps practical reasoning since it acts as reason approving itself. The boniform faculty acts to restore everything to the state of happiness intended by God; it functions as a faculty able to grasp the original vision. Men are not prophets, so their epistemic workings are different. Vermeir argues that More has a Neoplatonic view of imagination and reason, and that imagination plays the role of an intermediary between the material and the immaterial worlds, in both prophets and non-prophets. But longer research is needed on my part to fully display More’s own view on the interplay between imagination and reason; so as to contrast it properly with Spinoza’s. This interplay, however, will never be as perfect as the activity of the boniform faculty of the prophets. The ability to grasp God’s good and to pursue what’s just will always be imperfect.

3. Anne Conway: The Difficulty of True Inspiration

Conway's criticism is more elaborate and refined. She wants to show, against Spinoza, that God is not constituted by the creatures and the creatures are not part of God: her main disagreement with Spinoza is his identification of God with nature, making one being of both (Conway, *Principles*, 64). Conway conceives God as "in a true and real sense an essence or substance distinct from his creatures, although not divided or separate from them, but present in everything most closely and intimately in the highest degree" (Conway, *Principles*, 49). But she does not want to accept what Spinoza considers a corollary of his monism: that creatures are somehow parts of, or inhere in, God. For Spinoza, 'whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be nor be conceived without God' (E1p15). From this thesis, it follows that God is the immanent cause of all things (E1p18), given that everything that there is is *in* God. Conway's critique is directed towards the notion of God's immanence and its consequences (the absence of divine providence, free will, and teleology). She conceives of a monism where God acts as a transitive cause and, therefore, cannot be completely identified with creatures and Christ nor be considered as a fully separate substance. The paradox, again, appears because, in her system, God is distinguishable from Christ and creatures to the point that God becomes (almost) a substance of its own. Nevertheless, God is only able to act as a transitive cause because God and the substance share some characteristics. It is through the shared qualities between the substances that Conway explains causation between God, Christ, and creatures (such as the acts of creation and providence).

For Conway, it is the relationship between god and creatures as one of emanation. The motion between bodies is mediated by the sympathy and antipathy that occurs among bodies, as sympathy functions as a medium of both union and transmission of movements between parts. Images will have their effect depending on how sympathy and antipathy mediate the relationships between the bodies

and spirits involved. Since every transference of vital action implies mutual change, that is, the subject gains more light or loses some light (spirit, vitality), the cognitive activity resulting from imagination is always transformative. Cognition implies transformation. But not necessary the cognition or understanding produced by a certain image will compose - sympathetically - with our vitality, enhancing or promoting it. And the fact that we can imagine things that do not contribute to our vitality explains the workings of transmutation in lower directions. Bad imagining also explains sins (she uses the example of the image of a beast transforming a human being into a beast-like being if he imagines his own image as that of a beast).

Given that cognition is transmission of images and implies a change – for better or worse – in vital activity, to be an epistemically reliable subject one has to be an adequate medium of vital action, acting to increase perfection and goodness. Conway sees a difference between imagination and reason, and textually expresses it when she is defining the continual action of God in creating creatures: "And although the imagination and understanding conceives this with difficulty, true and solid reason sufficiently affirms it" (Chap III, S. 8). Depending on the level of activity caused by knowledge, there can be great and unexpected metamorphoses of a single individual. Since an individual cannot change its substance, but only its movement (and consequently, its quantity of matter/spirit or its degree of perfection), the individual can change its mode of being completely. A transcendent god and Christ are examples of positive moral changes, those that generate more perfection. This exemplar paradigm would be impossible with an immanent god. This argument is clearer when she contextualizes it in her refutation of Hobbes and Spinoza (Conway, *Principles*, 65).

More and Conway think they can escape the claim of enthusiasm – although in very different ways – due to their postulation of transcendence. They see that Spinoza's immanent monism leads to an epistemology that is somehow mystical; but it is not clear how postulating some level of transcendence prevents the claim of enthusiasm at all. They understand enthusiasm as a false capacity to

know and speak truly about God's understanding and will. But knowledge of God and speaking truly about his workings depends upon how one conceives the power of reason and of imagination. It seems that Conway is not worried about truth in itself or about being detached from experience, but about how true ideas can help us lead a more spiritual or morally perfect life; that is, about how truth can change our behavior.

There is a story that Pugliese found in Conway's letters that further evidences that language is the instrument of mental causation, or belief transformation; that is, the instrument of expression of our capacity for *logos proforikos*, that is, for saying what is true, with the proper intention. Even with the mediation of language, it is not easy to figure out whether we speak properly or when we do so. In a letter from February 4th 1675, to Henry More, Conway is telling her friend and tutor that she is about to change her maids for others who are Quaker women. More has been worried about Conway's association with the Quakers and the underlying reasons for her switch in religious identity. In one way, given Conway's impairing headaches and low tolerance for noise, finding the right maid was a medical matter. In the letter, she hopes the Quaker maids could be suitable for her circumstances: "if they [insofar as Quakers] prove what they seem to be, lovers of quiet and retirement" (Conway Letters, p.257). In respect to More's concerns, Conway considers the possibility that she might be wrong in her decision of looking for a caretaker with a specific religious framework. Her way of showing respect for his worry is by raising an epistemic question: how can someone know that she is thinking the right thing? How can one know whether she is doing the right thing? Truth does not have an index attached to it; otherwise, there would be no disputation.

And there is more: Conway considers that there are three epistemic emotions that might be experienced with some level of similarity and, for this reason, it is important to be able to distinguish among them: melancholy, enthusiasm, and true inspiration. Differentiating these three is necessary for true knowledge; otherwise, one would be "imposed upon to believe a lie". Truth is not

even clear for the subject who experiences it. Here we arrive at a new difficulty: the contemplation of divinity and of the order of nature is an epistemological foundation. But the intellectual contemplation of God can come from melancholy, enthusiasm or true inspiration. However, it is not clear how we can distinguish true inspiration from melancholy or enthusiasm, and we consider this conclusion to be a turning point in Conway's philosophy, for here she is defending Spinoza, insofar as there is no way to escape the "accusation of enthusiasm" or even "melancholy" when we are trying to express true inspiration. Conway herself did not offer a precise definition either in the *Principles* or in the correspondence to More; it looks like a limit on what can be known. This is the final difficulty that is left for us to investigate; as a philosophical problem in itself, beyond Spinoza, Spinozism and anti-Spinozism.

4. Spinoza and the Ways of Imagining God and Experiencing Transformations

Recapitulating the core propositions of the *Ethics* with which we opened this study: E2p47 states that the human mind has an adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God, but in E5p36s he says that although we know by reason that everything depends on God, this proof does not affect the mind; so although we have an adequate – and innate – idea of God, the other ideas relating to this one is inoperative (the causal dependency of things on God); moreover, at the same time, there is contrasting general tendency for imagining God inadequately, a kind of imagination that strikes the mind more often (Garver, 2018). Another aspect of the problem that More and Conway pose to Spinoza's description of the mechanisms of our religious cognition concerns an imbalance. Whether Spinoza was a "god-intoxicated man" as Novalis would characterize, or an atheist as More would say, this matters only insofar as this lack of balance in the operative character of the adequate idea of God and also of the inadequate idea of god (but this one is less controversial) is a rule of our nature, that is, it is a description of what can really happen with all of us. We can "exaggerate" in our reasoning, relating

all things to God all the time; and we can lack that kind of reasoning as well; both kinds of imbalance. The idea of God can create extremists as well as intolerants with religion; that is why understanding the cognitive processes, the mental operations involved in our religious cognition, is so central today. There is an ideal point of equilibrium that should be entertained, even though there is no clear limit of the health of these operations.

When Conway asks More about the difference among enthusiasm, melancholy, and true inspiration, she is also recognizing that the process of turning the adequate idea of God operative is dangerous and somehow led by arbitrary subjective criteria. It is each one of us who has to go through the effort described in part 5 of reorganizing the ideas of affects with the aid of imagination so that the ideas of the mind are related to the adequate idea of God. This epistemic mechanism is the same mechanism for the development of one's freedom. The result is that the adequate idea of the eternal and infinite essence of God becomes operative, affecting the individual, that is, the body-mind complex as a whole; but maybe affecting too much, maybe too little. Adequately imagining God is thought as a strategy for operating transformations with respect to how one lives and how one experiences the relations with others and society more generally; but most probably we are doing it wrong. The important lesson here is that no matter how you imagine God, you will certainly experience transformations resulting from this idea. Not all ideas are transformative and central to the web of ideas like the idea of God.

Even when the mind inadequately and more commonly imagines God as an anthropomorphic being, a ruler that rewards and punishes, and as an all-knowing being with teleological intentions; even then, we are performing high level cognitive operations that allowed for the consolidation of our social structures and our social cognition. Seeing a mind, an intelligence, a soul on an object, on a mask, is the basis of compassion - for example; the fact that we see a face in the cloud, a saint on a toast, indicates that we can see the other as a being, no matter whether the other is a human, a woman, a man, a plant, or an animal. We can exaggerate there as well seeing more than we

should, as we can lack this capacity and become dangerously detached from the surrounding world.

To conclude, we recall the lessons of the Dutch “communicant of no church.” According to Spinoza, the eternal and infinite essence of God consists in a single self-caused substance endowed with infinite attributes, apprehended by the human mind under two of these—thought and extension—which express themselves in infinitely many finite modes. God, that is, Nature, is the one substance of which all things are modes, and in which we inhere in different ways. Whether Spinoza’s naturalism is interpreted as the defense of an immanent monism or as a form of naturalism retaining certain transcendental overtones, seventeenth-century European intellectual circles largely rejected his conception of God, construing it as enthusiasm, atheism, or mysticism (Bayle, 1697). From the perspective of Spinoza and many contemporary interpreters, however, such accusations stem from an inadequate imagination of the divine. Revisiting the reception of Spinoza in England thus offers an opportunity to reassess how early modern disputes concerning sectarianism and metaphysics continue to illuminate the fragile search for individual and collective equilibrium.

If we return to the historical reconstruction that guided this study, it becomes evident that the English reception of Spinoza was shaped not only by the publication of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, but also by the circulation of letters, manuscript versions of the *Ethics*, and summaries of what Spinoza himself referred to as “my philosophy.” The responses of Henry More and Anne Conway were therefore not merely reactions to a polemical caricature, but engagements—albeit mediated and partial—with theses already central to Spinoza’s system, particularly the identification of God with nature and the consequences of divine immanence. The charge of atheism or enthusiasm must be understood within a broader concern regarding the moral and epistemic authority of theological concepts in a context marked by confessional tensions and the aftermath of the Reformation. At stake was metaphysical classification and the practical efficacy of religious ideas.

From this perspective, the disagreement between Spinoza, More, and Conway converges on a shared philosophical problem: how does the idea of God become operative in shaping conduct and transforming life? Spinoza locates this transformation in the internal reorganization of the affects and in the gradual activation of the adequate idea; More appeals to transcendence and providential intervention; Conway articulates a dynamic ontology of sympathy, emanation, and moral metamorphosis. Despite their divergences, all three recognize that religious cognition is inseparable from imagination, and that imagination carries both emancipatory and destabilizing potentials. The seventeenth-century controversy over Spinozism thus emerges as an early reflection on the cognitive mechanisms of belief—one whose relevance persists insofar as the equilibrium between reason, imagination, and moral transformation remains perpetually at risk.

Data availability

Not applicable.

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