Baruch Spinoza and the naturalisation of the Bible: An epistemological investigation

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This article investigates the naturalisation of the Bible. Three voices are of special importance in the narrative presented in this article; they are Aristotle (384–322 BC), Rene Descartes (1596–1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). This article will investigate the scientific method and metaphysics espoused by each of the three scholars, thereby highlighting changes in scientific method and metaphysics that lead to the naturalisation of the Bible. Firstly, Aristotle pioneered a scientific method (his logic) that would dominate for centuries, as well as a highly influential metaphysics. Secondly, Descartes, witnessing the horrors of the Thirty Years War and seeing first-hand the new discoveries that brought about the scientific revolution, reacted against Aristotle's metaphysics. Ironically he then used Aristotle's scientific method to provide a foundation for the new science resulting in Descartes's famous dualism. Thirdly, Spinoza, equally horrified by the amount of religious violence of his time, reacts against Descartes's dualism, providing scholars with a monist metaphysics that would contribute greatly to the naturalisation of the Bible. This article will be relevant to theologians who wish to engage more fully with contemporary Western culture.

Introduction

> Naturalism is not so much a special system as a point of view or tendency common to a number of philosophical and religious systems; not so much a well-defined set of positive and negative doctrines as an attitude or spirit pervading and influencing many doctrines. As the name implies, this tendency consists essentially in looking upon nature as the one original and fundamental source of all that exists, and in attempting to explain everything in terms of nature … All events, therefore, find their adequate explanation within nature itself. But, as the terms nature and natural are themselves used in more than one sense, the term naturalism is also far from having one fixed meaning. (Dubray 1911)

This article tries to recount and make sense of changes in scientific method and metaphysics that lead to the naturalisation of the Bible, that is, the tendency to negate the supernatural authorship of the Bible, believing it to be a product of nature that should be investigated as such.

Three voices are of special importance in the narrative presented in this article; they are Aristotle (384–322 BC), Rene Descartes (1596–1650) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). I hope to show how Rene Descartes used Aristotle's scientific method whilst rejecting his views on metaphysics. Spinoza, in turn, reacted to Descartes's views on metaphysics whilst utilising Aristotle's scientific method.

Important to note, the narrative presented here is only part of the story of the naturalisation of the Bible. It forms part of a larger attempt[1] to recount and make sense of changes in scientific method and metaphysics that lead to the naturalisation of the Bible. It is hoped that this attempt would make the process behind the naturalisation of the Bible more accessible to theologians who do not specialise in philosophy and who would normally not consult philosophical journals. Knowledge of the naturalisation of the Bible (and faith) is of vital importance to theologians who wish to engage more fully with contemporary Western culture.

Aristotle

Introduction

As a theologian, I approach Aristotle cautiously, relying exclusively on scholars who have already mastered his thought. I do this because studying Aristotle is not without its problems.[2]

1.Refer to Legaspi (2010).

2.Louis Groarke (2014) writes that: 'What we have are largely notes, written at various points in his career, for different purposes, edited and cobbled together by later followers. The style of the resulting collection is often rambling, repetitious, obscure, and disjointed. There are many arcane, puzzling, and perhaps contradictory passages. This problem is compounded by the abstract, technical vocabulary logic sometimes requires and by the wide-ranging scope and the scattered nature of Aristotle's observations'.

Although theologians may find Aristotle difficult to understand at first, knowledge of his scientific method and metaphysics is important to anyone who wants to come to grips with Western thought. With theologians grappling with popular culture, as well as the Church's place within it, there is no better place to start with than Aristotle. The same is true for this article; a thorough treatment of Aristotle's thought will greatly simplify our understanding of Descartes and Spinoza.

Aristotle's metaphysics

It is best to start with an important question in Aristotle's time: what is change? Physics, the study of nature, was closely intertwined with change. Philosophers in Aristotle's time regularly debated whether things can change (Parmenides) and if so, why do things change? What types of change exist? Aristotle and his fellow philosophers thought that he who knew change and what brought it about, would know nature itself. Why was change so important? If everything constantly changes we would not be able to know anything, therefore, to know something, to have real knowledge an object in nature, we need to know that which do not change, the universal or the ever-enduring aspects of reality (Groarke 2014; Shields 2007; Spade 1999).

Aristotle believed in two types of change, the one could be called generative and the other qualitative. With generative change something new comes to be or goes out of existence, a person is born and then eventually dies; with qualitative change something that already exists undergoes change without going out of existence, for example a person grows old (Shields 2007).

Nevertheless, how does Aristotle explain the different types of change? For this we turn to Paul Vincent Spade's (1999) 'pincushion model' as he himself refers to it tongue in cheek. Spade explains Aristotle's views regarding being, with the metaphor of a pincushion. In this case, the pincushion consists of form and matter; together we call the pincushion substance. The form is what gives the pincushion its essential and necessary features. Without it, the pincushion would cease to exist. Then there are the smooth-tipped pins stuck into the pincushion which can be removed or added without destroying the pincushion or substance. In other words, with or without them, it essentially remains the same pincushion. These smooth pins from the outside give the pincushion its accidental features.

Let us take a cow as an example. Cows are known to be viviparous (bringing forth living young). It is an essential or necessary feature of cows. Therefore, if we see a creature that lays eggs (oviparous, that is, with the young developing outside of body) we will not say that the creature is a cow, even if it remotely resembles one. On the other hand, if we have one animal with a brown coat and another with a white and black coat we would still not hesitate to call both animals cows if they are viviparous, et cetera.

As Shields (2007) explains, essential features are the most basic properties that all the other (necessary) properties depend on. In this case our rational faculty (our mind) is our most basic essential feature. If that is absent we will not have the ability to speak, make jokes or gather food for the winter. These essential and necessary features are what it means to be human. Thin or fat, long or short, athletic or stocky, hairy or bald, muscular or weak are accidental features of human beings. Whilst human beings necessarily possess minds, they are not all necessarily tall, or short.

What is generative change then? We call it substantial change because matter obtains a new form. The substance changes because its form or, rather, its essential and necessary features undergo change. For example, generative change occurs when a bronze statue changes from the form of rubble to the form of a human statue. The matter (in this case bronze) is the underlying constant with the form that is changing (from rubble to statue). Qualitative change, on the other hand, would be when the objects 'pins' change but the form stays the same, in other words, when it only changes accidental properties (Shields 2007; Spade 1999).

Aristotle's scientific method

This brings us to Aristotle's views on knowledge and science which coincided with the views of his day. Ancient science, episteme (Greek) or scientia (its Latin equivalent), pointed to knowledge that was held with certainty. In Aristotle's case episteme or scientia was knowledge of the essence of groups of objects in nature that could be held with certainty (Shields 2007).

At this point, it may be prudent to mention that although Aristotle believed episteme to be the knowledge of the essence of an object, Groarke (2014) points out that a looser translation also allows necessary features to be included. Thus, to have knowledge is to know an object's essential and necessary features with certainty. Secondly, but equally important, Aristotle was not interested in individual or primary substances (for example, Spot my four-footed friend) but rather in secondary substances like species and genera (dog or mammal). That is because I will only come to know the essential and necessary features of Spot when I look at dogs in general. Thirdly, knowledge is not a word but a sentence or rather a proposition: human beings are rational. Aristotle's scientific method will, therefore, pay close attention to propositions that assert something about the essential and necessary features of substances. Groarke (2014) describes it as follows:

> A proposition is ideally composed of at least three words: a *subject* (a word naming a substance), a *predicate* (a word naming a property), and a connecting verb, what logicians call a *copula* (Latin, for "bond" or "connection"). (n.p.)

Next Aristotle identifies ten categories that make up propositions. The first category has to do with the subject or substance. The next nine categories deal with the predicates regarding the substance. The ten categories are substance,

quantity, quality, relation, where, when, being-in-a-position, possessing, doing, undergoing something or being affected by something (Groarke 2014; Shields 2007).

The next step in Aristotle's scientific method is the use of deduction, a method he pioneered that would later on be refined by the ancient Greek geometer Euclid through his Euclidian geometry. Deduction or syllogism comes in a variety of forms. The most basic way of describing deduction is to use the following propositions: if A = B and B = C then A = C. With deduction you deduce additional propositions (A = C) from existing propositions (A = B and B = C). For example, if ostriches have feathers and birds have feathers, ostriches are birds (although they cannot fly). The proposition may not be new knowledge, but if the starting propositions were necessary then the proposition deduced from it will be guaranteed to also be necessary. Aristotle views science as knowledge held with certainty. In Aristotle's mind, this meant starting with two propositions you are certain about and then progressing from there on to knowledge that is equally certain. Deduction helped ensure this (Groarke 2014; Shields 2007).

However, how could he be so certain of the truth of his starting propositions? Aristotle called for self-evident propositions. Usually propositions are justified by other propositions: this is so because that is so. An infinite regress would entail that propositions are based one on the other into infinity. Aristotle would have none of this. We could never be certain of our propositions if the one rested on the other into infinity. Aristotle therefore looked to self-evident propositions, which carry the truth regarding themselves within themselves. They are not justified by other propositions. When you see them, you just know them to be true. The proposition I think therefore I exist, is a good example. Or in Aristotle's case, human beings are rational beings. How do we acquire these necessary self-evident propositions? (Groarke 2014; Shields 2007).

Aristotle reasoned that one could, through repeated experience or induction, grasp the necessary properties of an object in nature to the extent that they become self-evident to the mind. These necessary properties so induced are then used as self-evident propositions in a deductive argument to further deduce additional propositions. This method would later be known as Euclid's geometry or foundationalism (Groarke 2014; Shields 2007).

Last remarks

Aristotle's views on knowledge and science had a direct bearing on his physics. According to Aristotle, when we want to know nature we need to know the material (matter) and formal causes (form) of objects in nature; more still, we also need to know who or what imposed the change – the efficient cause – and to what end the change was imposed – the object's final cause. For example: a bronze statue's material cause would be bronze, the formal cause would be the shape of the statue, the efficient cause would be the sculptor and the final cause would be to honour the fallen or something or another. If we know these four causes of an object we know the object itself (Cohen 2014; Shields 2007).

After this brief explanation of Aristotle's metaphysics, scientific method (logic) and physics, we can look at his views on motion more closely. Aristotle believed that substances consisted of a mixture of four elements, with one element dominating. The elements were earth, water, air and fire. This fitted well with his cosmology. Aristotle, like many of his compatriots, believed in earth as the centre of the universe, above that, one above the other, the spheres of water, air and fire. The element that dominated within a substance, also determined its movement. A substance that mainly consisted of earth would fall down if picked up (a stone) whilst a substance consisting primarily of fire would rise up (a flame). Each was trying to reach its natural position that is earth with earth, water with water, air with air and fire with fire. The four elements held true for the sub-lunar world; above that everything (heavenly bodies) was made of a fifth element called aether, moving in concentric circles around the earth (Cohen 2014; Principe 2011; Shields 2007).

Rene Descartes

Introduction

Some tend to oversimplify the Middle Ages as if they were dark ages waiting to be banished by the Enlightenment. Fortunately, there have been quite a few important scholarly contributions that show that the Middle Ages are pivotal in the history of the West.[3] In light of this, the following generalisation may seem grossly oversimplified, nevertheless, it remains useful during the initial stages of the Middle Ages; Plato and Augustine prevailed. During the latter stages, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas prevailed with churchmen (scholastic theology), making diligent use of syllogism and logical argument. It was against Aristotle that scholars would rebel during the scientific revolution that started with the Renaissance (1300–1650).

Descartes lived during this diverse period in history. With the Renaissance in the south of Europe, an equally important movement would arise in the north: the Reformation. Whilst Renaissance humanists wanted reform aided by the Greek and Roman classics, the Reformers pleaded for reform in the light of the Gospel and an earlier classical form of Christianity. Both, however, wanted reform of medieval society.[4] Charles Taylor (2007:62) goes to great lengths to recount how badly Protestants wanted medieval society to conform to the demands of the Gospel and a more classical

3.For example, *A secular Age* by Charles Taylor (2007) and *The theological origins of modernity* by Michael Allen Gillespie (2008).

4.Legaspi (2010:11) writes that: 'Renaissance humanism is better described as a broad, religiously flexible, and civic-minded educational program encompassing the humanities (*studia humanitatis*) and a movement, furthermore, rooted in medieval appropriation of classical sources. One of its distinctive features was the study of classical texts in their original languages – preeminently Latin but also Greek and, later, Hebrew. This gave rise to the Renaissance ideal of the *vir trilinguus* and the close association of political and religious renewal with fresh appropriations of ancient learning. Humanism was a reformatory enterprise energized at all points by philology'.

conception of Christianity on the one hand, and, on the other, how eager Renaissance humanists were to rebuild medieval society utilising ancient Rome as template.

Unfortunately, political and religious conflicts (Roman Catholic versus Protestant) fuelled a series of wars in central Europe, collectively called the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). This War eventually bled Europe dry and left her devastated. Knowledge of this tends to change the view of the Renaissance from a time of peace, progress and stability to some of Europe's darkest days (refer to Stephen Toulmin [1990] for a more detailed discussion in this regard).

Fortunately, the Renaissance was not only doom and gloom. Several technological advancements made during this period proved to be pivotal. New, more powerful telescopes, for instance, gave Renaissance scientists insight into the realm beyond the sub-lunar, proving Aristotle's views on the heavenly bodies and their motion to be fallacious (Principe 2011).

The new inventions spurned on the scientific revolution with illustrious names such as Tyco Brahe (1546–1601), Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) and Isaac Newton (1642–1727).

Those scholars at the front of the scientific revolution, such as Galileo Galilei, looked upon nature as if it was a machine, functioning according to set laws that could be described with mathematical equations. It could be said that it was an engineer's way of looking at the world. Underlying this new mechanistic philosophy that broke with Aristotelian and medieval concepts of nature, was the corpuscular theory, partly derived from Democritus, a Greek philosopher who predated Aristotle. The corpuscular hypothesis stated that:

- Matter is composed of very small material particles (corpuscles or atoms).
- Impact is the sole means of communicating motion.
- Qualities such as colour, taste and smell can be reduced to the primary, inherent properties of the corpuscles of which the body is composed of (Kochiras 2013; Principe 2011; Slowik 2013; Uzgalis 2012).

The proponents of the corpuscular hypothesis saw the world in a different way than people ordinarily experienced it. The ordinary world was full of colours, shapes, smells, movements and sounds. In this world God and people acted out of free will.

The world of the scientific revolution was, however, an engineer's world. It consisted of tiny atoms that constituted objects in reality. These objects had three-dimensional shapes (an object's primary qualities) and were in motion or at rest. Objects also had colour, taste and a certain smell (an object's secondary qualities). Whilst the primary qualities really belonged to the object itself, the secondary qualities did not. These were somehow caused in us through the interaction between an object in nature and our senses. Take a mountainside as an example. The colour of the mountainside changes throughout the day. It all depends on the way the sun shines on the mountainside as well as our perspective towards it. The same goes for taste; it differs from person to person, depending on a variety of factors when people interact with (taste) something in reality. Secondary qualities were therefore not viewed as something permanent that existed on their own.

The world of the scientific revolution was colourless and silent. All that really existed was the three-dimensional shape of an object and its motion. Not that this was, in fact, perceived as a negative thing. Such a world could be described with mathematical equations that explained universal laws (Kochiras 2013; Principe 2011; Slowik 2013; Uzgalis 2012).

What is important is that near the end of the Renaissance, traditional religion showed itself to be bitterly divided, leading to an unending series of conflicts while at the same time unable to help guide Europe back on its feet. Equally important is that scholars started seriously to doubt the old Aristotelian view of the world. A new more attractive way of describing reality was presenting itself.

The scientific revolution with its mechanistic philosophy and underlying corpuscular hypothesis, posed serious questions to basic tenets of the Christian faith that the majority of Europeans at that time still held dear. What is to become of free will, so important to the Christian faith or the role of God who guides history? Philosophers of the 17th century grappled with issues such as these, each trying to paint a satisfactory picture of the make-up of reality that would take into account both the Christian faith and the new mechanistic philosophy.

Descartes's epistemology and scientific method

Another important member of the scientific revolution, and father of the Enlightenment, Rene Descartes, also broke with Aristotelian metaphysics (matter and form equal substance) and physics (the focus on a four-fold causal explanation for the physical world).

Having lived through the hell of the Thirty Years War, and seeing first-hand the destruction of Europe, he was convinced that traditional religion, now bitterly divided, would not be able to help guide Europe back on its feet. Furthermore, Catholics were committed to the outdated teachings of Aristotle through Aquinas. This left the revolution in science. How could this science be shown to be grounded in fact (Hatfield 2011; Lokhorst 2011; Newman 2010)?[5]

5.Smith (2010) writes: 'In establishing the ground for science, Descartes was at the same time overthrowing a system of natural philosophy that had been established for centuries - a qualitative, Aristotelian physics. In a letter to Mersenne, dated 28 January 1641, Descartes says 'these six meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please do not tell people, for that might make it harder for supporters of Aristotle to approve them. I hope that readers will gradually get used to my principles, and recognize their truth, before they notice that they destroy the principles of Aristotle.' Unlike his earlier work, *The World*, the *Meditations* parts ways with the 'old' science without explicitly forwarding controversial views, like that of the Copernican heliocentric model of the solar system'.

Interestingly enough, to solve his problem Descartes turned to Aristotle's logic, whose scientific method was still much respected. Descartes's famous method of doubt would be loosely based on Aristotle's logic.

There was one problem. Aristotle was an empiricist, in other words he believed that experience is the fountain of knowledge. Descartes, in turn, was a rationalist who closely adhered to nativism.[6] Samet and Zaitchik (2014) define nativism as follows:

> Nativism and Empiricism are rival approaches to questions about the origins of knowledge. Roughly speaking, Nativists hold that important elements of our understanding of the world are innate, that they are part of our initial condition, and thus do not have to be learned from experience. Empiricists deny this, claiming that all knowledge is based in experience … It should be noted that the commonplace opposition of Empiricism to Rationalism reflects back on 17th and 18th century philosophical debates in which Nativism was a central plank in the Rationalist position. (n.p.)

Whilst Aristotle had the highest regard for the mind and its ability to reason, he did not believe in innate knowledge. The origin of knowledge is first and foremost in the senses. Descartes, on his part, greatly valued experiential knowledge, but he thought that we first needed the innate truths contained in the mind to give us a picture of the world in order to guide our senses. Whereas Aristotle's science would begin with repeated experiences, Descartes's began with mathematical arguments that took the form of a process of methodical doubt. Both, however, used more or less the same method (Hatfield 2011; Uzgalis 2012).

With his now famous method of doubt, Descartes started to tease out the innate propositions from his mind. After doubting literally everything, he came up with the clear and distinct innate idea that he is thinking and (therefore) existing (*cogito ergo sum*). It was the only thing he was indubitably certain of and it would be his first self-evident foundational proposition.[7] Descartes would continue to unearth and utilise innate propositions such as these in his quest to provide Europe with a picture of all reality and a foundation for the new science.

Descartes's metaphysics

Descartes's picture of reality was his metaphysics. His first self-evident proposition, for example, captured the essence of the human soul, namely thinking. All he could be certain of was that he was an immaterial thinking thing (he was still not even certain that he had a body). That was the essence of human beings. Descartes then proceeded to show, through innate propositions, that the essence of God is perfection and that the essence of everything around us (matter) is extension (Hatfield 2011; Lokhorst 2011; Newman 2010).[8]

How should we understand matter as extension? Supporters of the corpuscular hypothesis were by no means unified in the precise make-up of reality. Rene Descartes supported the plenist version of the corpuscular theory. Plenists believed that reality was made up of infinitely divisible small particles that were simply everywhere. There was no such thing as a vacuum or void. Air and everything else was matter. According to this view the essence of matter was extension: if matter was everywhere, it was extended. John Locke, in turn, held to the atomist version of the corpuscular theory. He believed that indivisible atoms existed in space. Kochiras explains the difference as follows:

> Plenist theorists deny the void and assert a plenum of matter, as Descartes does by identifying matter with extension. Such theorists may speak of particles, but their particles are not atoms, being infinitely or at least indefinitely divisible. Atomist theorists, by contrast, accept the void and take the particles or corpuscles comprising compound bodies to be indivisible, or at least probably so.' The difference between plenist and atomist versions had further bearing on issues such as motion and gravity, but that does not concern us here. (Kochiras 2013)

The essence of matter was extension; it, therefore, had three-dimensional shape. Objects with three-dimensional shape that obeyed the laws of motion could be described with mathematical equations. This included our bodies. This is where the senses came in. The senses tell us about the dimensions of objects in reality and, for example, how fast an object is moving. The senses could, however, not penetrate deep into the essences of reality; for that we needed reason and innate ideas. Hatfield (2011) describes it best:

> In considering Descartes' answer to how we know, we can distinguish classes of knowledge. Metaphysical first principles are known by the intellect acting alone. Such knowledge should attain absolute certainty … Objects of natural science are known

6. Today a distinction is generally held between Continental rationalism and British empiricism during the 17th and 18th centuries. This distinction pertains to Rene Descartes (France), Gottfried Leibniz (Germany) and Baruch Spinoza (Netherlands) as the European Continental rationalists and John Locke (England), George Berkeley (Ireland) and David Hume (Scotland) as the British empiricists. In the end, so the story is often told, Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher would bring the two sides together with his Transcendental idealism.

7. Descartes (2012) writes: 'The Meditation of yesterday has filled my mind with so many doubts, that it is no longer in my power to forget them. Nor do I see, meanwhile, any principle on which they can be resolved; and, just as if I had fallen all of a sudden into very deep water, I am so greatly disconcerted as to be unable either to plant my feet firmly on the bottom or sustain myself by swimming on the surface. I will, nevertheless, make an effort, and try anew the same path on which I had entered yesterday, that is, proceed by casting aside all that admits of the slightest doubt, not less than if I had discovered it to be absolutely false; and I will continue always in this track until I shall find something that is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing more, until I shall know with certainty that there is nothing certain. Archimedes, that he might transport the entire globe from the place it occupied to another, demanded only a point that was firm and immovable; so, also, I shall be entitled to entertain the highest expectations, if I am fortunate enough to discover only one thing that is certain and indubitable'.

8. With regards to matter Descartes (2012) writes: 'Take, for example, this piece of wax; it is quite fresh, having been but recently taken from the beehive; it has not yet lost the sweetness of the honey it contained; it still retains somewhat of the odor of the flowers from which it was gathered; its color, figure, size , are apparent (to the sight); it is hard, cold, easily handled; and sounds when struck upon with the finger. In fine, all that contributes to make a body as distinctly known as possible, is found in the one before us. But, while I am speaking, let it be placed near the fire – what remained of the taste exhales, the smell evaporates , the color changes, its figure is destroyed, its size increases, it becomes liquid, it grows hot, it can hardly be handled, and, although struck upon, it emits no sound. Does the same wax still remain after this change? It must be admitted that it does remain; no one doubts it, or judges otherwise. What, then, was it I knew with so much distinctness in the piece of wax? Assuredly, it could be nothing of all that I observed by means of the senses, since all the things that fell under taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing are changed, and yet the same wax remains.' With the now famous wax experiment, Descartes tries to show that when it comes to wax, nothing is certain. The properties of the wax change depending on what is done with the wax, so much so that if he relied only on his senses he would not know what the essence of wax was. It is only through reason that he would come to know that the essence of matter was extension.

> by a combination of pure intellect and sensory observation: the pure intellect tells us what properties bodies can have, and we use the senses to determine which particular instances of those properties bodies do have. (n.p.)

How do we understand human beings? According to Descartes human beings are a duality, split between an immaterial thinking mind or soul, and matter or body that was extended. The two, mind and body, were connected through the pineal gland, as Descartes would later try to explain (Hatfield 2011; Lokhorst 2011).

Conclusion

Descartes taught the Western world that the criterion for truth was not to be found outside oneself in revelation, Church tradition or the Pope but in the mind's ability to grasp something as indubitably true (Hatfield 2011; Lokhorst 2011; Newman 2010).

More importantly, the new science proved to be controversial. If everything is governed by universal laws what is God's place in the bigger scheme of things? What type of freedom do humans have, if any, to go about their daily lives? Are we all simply robots? Descartes tried to supply his peers with a solution. Creation is extension governed by laws whilst human beings have an immaterial soul/mind that is not governed by set laws, free to operate and think as they wish. The same goes for an immaterial God.

Later scholars would reject Descartes mind/body dualism. Some, like Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) scoffed at the idea of immaterial material (soul/mind). He thought it was a contradiction in terms. There could only be matter, Hobbes said, even God existed out of some kind of matter. Free will was a fallacy. In the end Hobbes proved to be controversial in his own lifetime, yet he would continue to have a strong influence on later scholars. One of those was Baruch Spinoza (Duncan 2013).

Baruch Spinoza

Introduction

The Netherlands in Spinoza's day may have been tolerant, but only to a certain degree. Manuscripts that could be considered atheist or heretical were many times either published posthumously or anonymously. Spinoza himself published anonymously in Latin. In *A book forged in hell: Spinoza's scandalous treatise and the birth of the secular age* Nadler (2010) writes:

> Writing in May 1670, the German theologian Jacob Thomasius fulminated against a recent, anonymously published book. It was, he claimed, 'a godless document' that should be immediately banned in all countries. His Dutch colleague, Regnier Mansveld, a professor at the University of Utrecht, insisted that the new publication was harmful to all religions and 'ought to be buried forever in an eternal oblivion.' Willem van Blijenburgh, a philosophically inclined Dutch merchant, wrote that 'this atheistic book is full of abominations … which every reasonable person should find abhorrent.' One disturbed critic went so far as to call it 'a book forged in hell,' written by the devil himself'. (n.p.)

Reading up on the history of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, one cannot help but feel ambivalent. On the one hand Spinoza's thought did hold serious consequences for both Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity. The reactions of early commentators on his ethics may have been harsh but it was not without merit. That being said, the overall tone of religious dialogue in the 17th century was harsh. Gillespie (2008) writes:

> Beginning in the early sixteenth century and lasting until the middle of the seventeenth century, the Wars of Religion were conducted with a fervor and brutality that were not seen again until our own times. (n.p.)

And maybe this harshness is what contributed most to Spinoza's thought in the first place.

Spinoza the Jew was born and grew up during the devastation that was the Thirty Years War.[9] One could say that the reasons for the war were political, but they were still Christians (Protestant and Roman Catholic) visiting horrible atrocities upon one another. Spinoza's family fled Spain to escape forced conversion to Christianity. In Amsterdam he was excommunicated from the Jewish community for his views. In the midst of it all the Netherlands was embroiled in a dispute between the Arminians and Orthodox Calvinists culminating in the well-known Synod of Dort (1618–1619) as well as the disputes between the followers of Johannes Cocceius and Gisbertus Voetius. Times were volatile. The whole of Europe was in a phase of transition.

Spinoza's scientific method

Spinoza basically used the same geometric method as Descartes, borrowed from Aristotle and thereafter refined by the Greek geometer Euclid, but he used it more diligently. Spinoza first posited definitions, then axioms he believed to be self-evident, and then proceeded to state certain propositions based on the definitions and axioms. In this way he built his own metaphysical foundation without

9.Gillespie's (2008) words deserve mentioning in full: 'Religion were conducted with a fervor and brutality that were not seen again until our own times … The slaughter at Magdeburg, for all its horror, was not the first nor the last such event. During the Peasants' Rebellion in the 1520s, over one hundred thousand German peasants and impoverished townspeople were slaughtered, many of them when they rushed headlong into battle against heavily armed troops, convinced by their leader Thomas Mintzer that true believers were immune to musket balls. In 1572, seventy thousand French Huguenots were slaughtered in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The Franciscan monks who had preached that killing heretics was the surest way to salvation were pleased, but apparently not as pleased as Pope Gregory XIII, who was so delighted to receive the head of the slain Huguenot leader Coligny in a box that he had a special medal struck commemorating the event. And finally, lest anyone imagine that the barbarity was one-sided, Cromwell's model army sacked the Irish town of Drogheda in 1649, killing virtually everyone. They burned alive all those who had taken refuge in the St. Mary's Cathedral, butchered the women hiding in the vaults beneath it, used Irish children as human shields, hunted down and killed every priest, and sold the thirty surviving defenders into slavery. Cromwell, without the least sense of irony, thanked God for giving him the opportunity to destroy such barbarous heretics. While these accounts are shocking, they only give us an inkling of the horror of these wars that raged over Europe for more than five generations. By conservative estimates, the wars claimed the lives of 10 percent of the population in England, 15 percent in France, 30 percent in Germany, and more than 50 percent in Bohemia. By comparison, European dead in World War II exceeded 10 percent of the population only in Germany and the USSR. Within our experience only the Holocaust and the killing fields of Cambodia can begin to rival the levels of destruction that characterized the Wars of Religion'.

recourse to empirical experiment (Dutton 2005; Nadler 2013; Newlands 2013).

Let us look at a few examples. In Spinoza's Ethics, he first puts forth eight definitions familiar to most philosophers of his time, such as:

> III. By "substance" I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception. (De Spinoza 2012)

This is roughly Descartes's definition of substance; something that is conceived through itself, almost something like a self-evident idea. For Descartes the chief substance was God, although he also viewed soul and matter as lesser substances. Spinoza, however, acknowledges only one substance, that was God or nature. He continues to state that: 'IV. By "attribute" I mean that which the intellect perceives as constituting the essence of substance' and 'V. By "mode" I mean the modifications ("*affectiones*") of substance, or that which exists in, and is conceived through, something other than itself' (De Spinoza 2012).

Above is technical jargon harking back to Aristotle. Basically an attribute is equal to the essence of a substance and a mode is a modification of that substance. Spinoza then defined his conception of God saying: 'VI. By "God" I mean a being absolutely infinite – that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality'.

Spinoza then continues to list seven axioms[10] and a list of 36 propositions[11] that outline his whole metaphysical system.

In short, Spinoza says that God or nature is infinite in his essences. If God or nature was infinite, then there would not be anything that is not God or nature. All is one substance (Spinoza's monism). Two of the distinguishable essences or attributes of God are extension and thought. The modes (modifications) of extension are physical objects whilst the modes for thought are ideas.

This one substance consisting of infinite attributes is the cause of everything. Everything is but a modification of one of the attributes. Because God (nature) is the cause of everything, he also determines everything. In Spinoza's world there is no free will. Everything flows from and is determined by God because it must: there are no purposes, no aims, all simply exists because it must (Dutton 2005; Nadler 2013; Newlands 2013).

Spinoza's metaphysics

In the Christian faith, God is believed to stand apart from his creation. The Christian God created a world for a specific reason. He continues to be involved having created human beings who have the capacity to achieve or miss a goal, purpose or end that God has set for them for some reason or the other. Spinoza rejects this God.

Was Spinoza a pantheist? If we say that he equates God with nature, with the world and everything that exists, one could say that. But then, one must also add that he is not a pantheist in the ordinary sense of the word. Nadler (2013) writes that, '… it is a mistake to call him a pantheist in so far as pantheism is still a kind of religious theism'. What he means by this is that Spinoza is not the kind of pantheist who believes that God comes from the outside to inhabit an already existing world. Pantheists such as these believe that nature must be venerated as something holy. In contrast Spinoza thought that God is nature – the world. All is one substance, namely, monism. This one substance and its essence can best be understood through philosophy and science and not religion (Dutton 2005; Nadler 2013; Newlands 2013).

How does this play out in reality? Spinoza is a pioneer of naturalism. Because of his monist views everything has to be understood within the boundaries of nature (God). Any explanation of events in the world will be accepted for scrutiny if it does not resort to a supernatural God working from outside, as part of the explanation. In Spinoza's world there can be no recourse to a transcendent reality or being that will give us knowledge and special insight, or that will manipulate the course of history. There is only nature and its laws. This naturalism also became evident when Spinoza spoke about the only way to interpret the Bible. He writes the following in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (the TTP or *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*):

> I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature – in fact, it is almost the same. For as the interpretation of nature consists in the examination of the history of nature, and therefrom deducing definitions of natural phenomena on certain fixed axioms, so Scriptural interpretation proceeds by the examination of Scripture, and inferring the intention of its authors as a legitimate conclusion from its fundamental principles. By working in this manner everyone will always advance without danger of error – that is, if they admit no principles for interpreting Scripture, and discussing its contents save such as they find in Scripture itself – and will be able with equal security to discuss what surpasses our understanding, and what is known by the natural light of reason. (De Spinoza 2011)

According to Spinoza the Bible was not a book filled with scientific or philosophical knowledge, but was primarily written to teach the masses obedience. In that lies its

10.For example: 'AXIOM I. Everything which exists, exists either in itself or in something else. II. That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself. VII. If a thing can be conceived as non-existing, its essence does not involve existence' (De Spinoza 2012).

11.For example: 'PROPOSITION V There cannot exist in the universe two or more substances having the same nature or attribute. >>>>> Proof – If several distinct substances be granted, they must be distinguished one from the other, either by the difference of their attributes, or by the difference of their modifications (Prop. iv.). If only by the difference of their attributes, it will be granted that there cannot be more than one with an identical attribute. If by the difference of their modifications – as substance is naturally prior to its modifications (Prop. i.) – it follows that setting the modifications aside, and considering substance in itself, that is truly, (Deff. iii and vi.), there cannot be conceived one substance different from another – that is (by Prop. iv.), there cannot be granted several substances, but one substance only. Q.E.D' (De Spinoza 2012).

divinity, the exhortation to obey the command to love one's neighbour.[12] The books of the Bible have to be understood like any other book or object in nature. In this sense Spinoza breaks with traditional Protestant hermeneutics.[13]

Spinoza and the naturalisation of the Bible

With a call to return to the classics, the Renaissance humanists provided the reformers with the tools (literary and historical analysis) and learning to take on the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so the Bible as text became central in the dispute regarding different doctrines in Western Christianity. The origin of its authority, the correct original text (the Latin Vulgate or Greek and Hebrew manuscripts), the precise number of canonical books, as well as the most responsible methods of interpreting the Bible were disputed. With the text of the Bible in focus, amidst the conflict that embroiled Western Christianity, the Bible could no longer function as Catholic scripture. Catholic scripture in this case denotes the Bible as an anthology of sacred books that both belonged to the Church to be interpreted by the Church within its own divine economy of meaning. It was Catholic scripture that brought Europe together, supplied it with a moral universe and framed its philosophical enquiries. With the schism in Christianity there was no more Catholic scripture, only Bibles, differently authorised, with a different number of canonical books derived from different original texts with different interpretations given by Catholics, Lutherans and Protestants. Legaspi (2010) says:

> As the seventeenth century wore on, however, textualization was also advanced as a remedy to these same divisions. The new focus on textualization lay at the heart of attempts to unify and overcome religious division, to use critical science to regularize interpretation and save the text from confessional abuse … Like Walton, Spinoza believed that it was possible and, indeed, necessary to set forth a way of interpreting the Bible that would stem sectarian violence. Spinoza set out to accomplish this, first by setting aside theological judgments and confessional frameworks for understanding the Bible, which he regarded as the 'prejudices of theologians' and mere 'human fabrications' passed off as 'divine teachings.' … Careful philological study of the Bible shows that concerns with modern philosophical, political, legal, or scientific questions are alien to the Bible. The Bible contains the ancient historical record of a specific civilization, which is firmly embedded in the language and thought patterns of its time. (pp. 21, 23)

With this Spinoza sows the seeds of liberal theology. His ideas would be picked up by scholars and theologians such as Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) and Johann Herder (1744–1803), who would in turn have a substantial influence on the father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834).

Spinoza lived at the tail end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Enlightenment, commonly taken to have commenced with Descartes's death in 1650. He inherited the drive to reform the literary and historical analysis of classic texts, the wars of religion and the rise of the scientific revolution. He shared the drive to utilise literary and historical analysis of biblical texts to stem sectarian violence. It is within this context that Spinoza's conversation with his peers, including Descartes, and his drive to naturalise nature, must be seen. In his own efforts to fashion a new metaphysics for a new age of science marred by conflict, he was one of the first to naturalise the Bible.

Conclusion

This article investigated the thoughts of Aristotle, Descartes and Spinoza, thereby highlighting the changes in scientific method and metaphysics that lead to the naturalisation of the Bible. During the investigation a gradual picture emerged of human beings trying to figure it out for themselves, that is, abandoning Church authority and tradition, and instead utilising reason to arrive at knowledge of all reality of which they could be certain of. This became all the more important during the Thirty Years War and, thereafter, when the failings of the Church of the time (both Catholic and Protestant) became clear for all to see. How could we figure out things for ourselves without relying on Church authority, revelation of supposed current day miracles and prophecies? What would our own endeavours bring? Would we be able to remain Christians through all of this? Maybe reason is a better guide than supposed revelation; maybe it will help us become better Christians? Questions such as these may seem strange to our ears but they were important to scholars during the Enlightenment. Detractors such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) would regularly point out that rationalism leads to atheism, something that was hard to accept by Christian Enlightenment scholars.

All in all it would seem that Spinoza's pantheism was a by-product of the larger battle to wrestle control of society not only from the clergy but also from religious enthusiasts who were constantly stirring up trouble, finding fertile ground in a fast changing world that generated substantial uncertainty. It is within this context that Spinoza championed monism that would play such an important part in the naturalisation of the Bible.

The metaphysical speculations of Descartes and Spinoza would however be dealt a serious blow by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant famously argued that the mind structures knowledge. There was a noumenal world, the world as it was, and a phenoumenal world, the world as our mind structured it. We only had recourse to the phenoumenal world. Mind, once transcendent and able to speculate about the really

12. Spinoza writes in the TTP that: '[*W*]e know that Scripture does not aim at imparting scientific knowledge, and, therefore, it demands from men nothing but obedience, and censures obstinacy, but not ignorance. Furthermore, as obedience to God consists solely in love to our neighbour – for whosoever loveth his neighbour, as a means of obeying God, hath, as St. Paul says (Rom. xiii. 8), fulfilled the law – it follows that no knowledge is commended in the Bible save that which is necessary for enabling all men to obey God in the manner stated, and without which they would become rebellious, or without the discipline of obedience' (De Spinoza 2011).

13. Steinberg writes: '… since in the earlier chapters much of what Spinoza is doing is undermining the claim of Scripture as a source of genuine knowledge. The value of Scripture does not lie in its mysteries or its abstruse metaphysical content, since to the extent that it is concerned with these matters it is – by Spinoza's lights – utterly confused. Rather, it lies in the simple moral truths that Scripture contains…' (Steinberg 2013).

big questions, was now once more brought back to reality, bound to human life. Without mind able to know things as they were in themselves, speculation about the nature of God was futile; trying to prove his existence through rational arguments equally so.[14]

Why did Kant support such a view? He may have tried to shield the Christian faith from the probing investigations of those trying to figure it out for themselves. By saying that you cannot figure it out rationally, that you simply have to believe, he may have silenced scholars such as Hobbes and Spinoza. Unfortunately such a move also banishes discussions about God from the public arena because God is not something you can prove or dissect. Faith is something personal. This undoubtedly aided in the naturalisation of not only the Bible but also of society.

In closing, the events during the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe provide us with ample and rich material to meditate on as we move further into the 21st century.

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