

140. PANTHEISM CONTROVERSY

RARELY, IF EVER, HAS a thinker's reputation transformed as abruptly as Spinoza's did in the 1780s. The so-called pantheism controversy (*Pantheismusstreit*) of 1785 turned him apparently almost overnight from a villain to a hero. The controversy involved three German intellectual luminaries: G. E. Lessing (1729–1781), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), and F. H. Jacobi (1743–1819). Lessing and Mendelssohn were among the most revered figures of the German Enlightenment; after Lessing died, Mendelssohn planned to write a book about his departed friend. However, in 1783, Jacobi – an unremitting critic of Enlightenment rationalism – wrote to Mendelssohn that in the summer of 1780 he had visited Lessing. Much to Jacobi's amazement, Lessing had confessed to him that he was a Spinozist, believing in the ancient credo *hen kai pan*, “One and All” (which echoes for instance “[w]hatever is, is in **God**” of E1p15), and denying that there are final **causes**, **free** will, providence, or a personal God. Mendelssohn tried to pre-empt the shock of Lessing's alleged confession by presenting in *Morning Hours* (*Morgenstunden*) his own version of Lessing's confession: that it was, at most, an endorsement of what Mendelssohn called “purified pantheism,” which admits that all things inhere in God's intellect but denies that God is **extended** or without intellect and **will** – making Lessing's God resemble that of **Leibniz** and Wolff. Jacobi, however, got wind of Mendelssohn's plans, and both men hurried to be the first to publish their version of events. Jacobi won that race: in 1785, his quickly compiled *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza* (*Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*) was published a month before *Morning Hours*. This prompted Mendelssohn to write a refutation of Jacobi entitled *To the Friends of Lessing* (*An die Freunde Lessings*), in which he claimed that Jacobi had been fooled by Lessing's penchant for dialectical skirmishes filled with paradoxes and that any of his putative confessions were thus not to be taken seriously. However, the cat was already out of the bag; the news of Lessing's Spinozism had hit public consciousness. After having hastily delivered his final manuscript, in a cold winter's day, to the publisher, Mendelssohn fell ill and died a few days later, on 4 January 1786. This unexpected and sad ending to the controversy made it a scandal, with many of Mendelssohn's friends accusing Jacobi of killing him.

The seemingly abrupt controversy did not arise from thin air. Lessing not only had studied Spinoza's philosophy since 1763 but also belonged to a faction of Lutherans who emphasized direct individual **experience** and relationship to (a pantheistically understood) God. (By coincidence, 1763 is the year when Jacobi discovered Spinoza as well.) Mendelssohn, the prime representative of the moderate Wolffian Enlightenment, knew his Spinoza well too.

His *Philosophical Dialogues* (*Philosophische Gespräche*) of 1755 is a pioneering attempt to present Spinoza in an impartial and even sympathetic fashion. Despite all the persecution of, and efforts to abolish, Spinozism, by 1780s Spinoza had made such an impact in Germany that there were a notable number of crypto-Spinozists ready to be open about their convictions. If a thinker of Lessing's stature, reputation, and judgment was a Spinozist, there was no shame in being one. Jacobi's intention was to show, via Lessing's example, that Spinozistic **naturalism** leads to fatalism, atheism, and – the word he made known to modern philosophy – nihilism. Jacobi's accusation seems to build on a curious view of Spinozism: according to it, these noxious -isms follow since **finite** things – being merely **modes** of an impersonal God acting with geometrical necessity – lose their **individuality** and everything temporal is ultimately an illusion. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, was concerned that Lessing's reputation would become tarnished.

Both were proved wrong, and something unexpected happened: the controversy had the unintended effect of making Spinozism a kind of intellectual fashion. In fact, many saw it as the only viable competitor to increasingly popular Kantianism. Spinoza's naturalism was widely deemed as the philosophy proper to the scientific worldview, whereas his pantheism was interpreted in the religious register; Spinozism was seen to combine a rationalistic outlook with a spiritual sensibility. The Romantic poet Novalis (1772–1801) famously praised Spinoza as “the God-intoxicated man [*der Gott betrunkene Mensch*].” As a consequence, Spinozism appeared, of all things, a welcome middle path between obsolete theism and straightforward atheism – an astonishing turn of events for a philosophy not long ago condemned as sacrilegious.

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

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KEY PASSAGES

E1p14–16; E1p17s; E1app; E2p3s; E4pref; E5p42.

RECOMMENDED READING

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RELATED TERMS

God; Goethe; Idealistic Readings; Kant; Naturalism; Schopenhauer; Substance; Teleology.