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EMERSON'S HIDDEN INFLUENCE: WHAT CAN SPINOZA TELL THE BOY?

by

ADAM ADLER

Under the Direction of Reiner Smolinski and Melissa Merritt

ABSTRACT

Scholarship on Emerson to date has not considered Spinoza's influence upon his thought. Indeed, from his lifetime until the twentieth century, Emerson's friends and disciples engaged in a concerted cover-up because of Spinoza's hated name. However, Emerson mentioned his respect and admiration of Spinoza in his journals, letters, lectures, and essays, and Emerson's thought clearly shows an importation of ideas central to Spinoza's system of metaphysics, ethics, and biblical hermeneutics. In this essay, I undertake a biographical and philosophical study in order to show the extent of Spinoza's influence on Emerson and how this changes the traditional understanding of Emerson's thought.

INDEX WORDS: Ralph Waldo Emerson, American Transcendentalism, Spinoza, Spinozism, Spinoza's Influence

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ADAM ADLER

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I. Introduction

Despite similarities in their cosmologies and theologies, no systematic analysis of Baruch Spinoza's influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson yet exists. The secondary literature on Emerson to date either ignores Spinoza completely or casually dismisses him as not germane to Emerson's philosophy. However, even some early critics and reviewers of Emerson recognize his connection to Spinoza. The prominent poet and physician, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., for instance, in his biography of Emerson, likens him to Spinoza as a "God-intoxicated man" (132-3). Similarly, in a review in praise of Emerson's *Essays: First Series*, an anonymous author under the pseudonym 'Disciple' recognizes Spinoza's influence on Emerson and sees Emerson as continuing in the same tradition (Burkholder 107). Even some of Emerson's most outspoken and maledictive critics compare Spinoza and Emerson in attempts to imprecate the New England Transcendentalist movement. Such attempts, though made unjustly in order to charge Emerson with atheism, have some element of truth in their associating him with Spinoza.[1] Andrews Norton, the prominent nineteenth century Unitarian minister, wrote *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (1839) disparaging Emerson as an atheist in the same vein as Spinoza. While fundamentally misguided in his criticism, Norton nevertheless correctly observes similarities between them.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spinoza evoked heated reactions from both critics and supporters. Critics accused Spinoza of atheism and fatalism while supporters emphasized the relevance of God in his philosophy. From denouncement by Pierre

[1] From his lifetime until the late nineteenth century, many viewed Spinoza as an atheist and dismissed him on those grounds. Spinoza's name incited such controversy that his closest friends published his *Opera Posthuma* clandestinely under Spinoza's initials (B.D.S.) in 1677, and in June of 1678 the government of Holland officially banned the sale of Spinoza's works (Israel 289-94). Moreover, even in Emerson's time, Spinoza's name invoked implications of atheism. See the discussion below on the debate between Andrews Norton and George Ripley.

Bayle in the seventeenth century to Freidrich Heinrich Jacobi in the eighteenth Spinoza's philosophy received no respite from contention.

Bayle's and Jacobi's accusations had tremendous ramifications for Spinoza and his followers in his lifetime and through the late nineteenth century. Especially because of his denial of miracles, "Spinoza's philosophy provoked . . . consternation and outrage" (Israel 218). Even though Holland did not ban Spinoza's writings until 1678, legislation in 1653 gave "the city government . . . ample powers to inspect bookshops and sequestrate stocks of copies of . . . Spinoza's *Tractatus* [*Theologico-Politicus*] and, intermittently at least, it plainly did so" (Israel 273). Indeed, Spinoza became the "model of infidelity and atheism for men who needed a whipping-boy in the philosophical and theological debates at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth" (Colie 26). The protracted strife surrounding Spinoza's name continued throughout Europe and the United States.

As early as 1838 Emerson had read Bayle, Jacobi, and Johann Gottfried Herder, a famous defender of Spinoza (Cameron 47). In his Journals, Emerson references Bayle specifically and expresses disapproval of Bayle's treatment of philosophy in general.[2] Aware of Spinoza's unfavorable reception, Emerson did not react directly when Andrews Norton denounced the emerging Transcendentalist movement as Spinozist. Rather, George Ripley, a friend to Emerson and fellow Unitarian minister, came to the defense, charging Norton with behavior contrary to the spirit of the Unitarian faith.

In this spirit, those such as Emerson's biographer Ralph Rusk have seen fit to dissociate Emerson and Spinoza.[3] Even Holmes, though he compares the two thinkers on a superficial

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[2] See the section "Emerson on the Spinoza Controversy."

[3] Rusk only mentions Emerson's view of Spinoza once, explaining that "he vainly tried to catch Cabot's enthusiasm for [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph] Schelling and Spinoza. He was naturally repelled by what seemed to him harsh mathematical logic" (308). And indeed, Emerson does write this to his friend James Elliot Cabot, but he also

level, denies any substantive connection between them. [4] This understandable move to salvage Emerson's reputation, however, has led to a gap in scholarship on Emerson concerning the relationship between these two venerable philosophers. Indeed, considering Emerson's many references to Spinoza and the degree to which he absorbed Spinozist ideas, any complete understanding of Emerson must account for his Spinozist leanings. Many accounts of Emerson's philosophical influences such as those by Ray Benoit and Stuart Brown emphasize his Platonism, but even these characterizations more aptly speak to Emerson's Spinozist tendencies.

Although Spinoza's most striking influence on Emerson appears in *Nature* (1836), Spinozist ideas recur frequently in Emerson's essays, lectures, journals, and correspondence. Perhaps because of Spinoza's anathematic reputation, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, Emerson remained relatively soft-spoken in his veneration of and borrowings from Spinoza. However, on numerous occasions in his lectures and journals Emerson extols Spinoza, and his cosmological assertions express surprising similarities as well as marked differences to Spinoza's system of metaphysics. Furthermore, Emerson's personal situation as a minister questioning the validity of religious ritual and doctrine mirrors Spinoza's own conflict and

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mentions Spinoza on numerous occasions in his journals, essays, and lectures, listing Spinoza as one of the *Trismegisti*: "that lofty and sequestered class who have been its [the laws of the intellect's] prophets and oracles, high-priesthood of the pure reason…expounders of the principles of thought from age to age" ("Intellect," *Complete Works* II 204).

[4] Holmes portrays Emerson as a poor scholar rather than one influenced by Spinoza or Spinozist ideas. In an attempt at reassurance, Holmes offers comfort to those shocked by Emerson's more controversial sources: "let no one be frightened away from his pages by the terrible names of Plotinus and Proclus and Porphyry, of Behmen or Spinoza, or of those modern German philosophers with whom it is not pretended that he had any intimate acquaintance" (293-4). Quoting George Ripley, Holmes suggests that Emerson never "read ten pages of his great authorities, Plato, Plutarch, Montaigne, or Goethe, in the original. He is no friend to profound study any more than of philosophical speculation" (294). This claim of Ripley's and Holmes', of course, is highly dubious. In fact, Stuart Brown, in his essay "Emerson's Platonism," contends that Emerson "read the Dialogues [of Plato] in Greek, since he was so scornful of those who could not; but he often browsed in Thomas Taylor's translations and used them for comparison with his own readings" (328). In addition to consulting Thomas Taylor's translations, furthermore, Emerson also borrowed German translations of Plato's works from both the Harvard and Boston Athenæum libraries multiple times from 1826 through 1845 (Cameron 97). In 1828 and 1832, moreover, Emerson consulted Goethe's works in their original German, suggesting a serious commitment to scholarship (Cameron 75). More significantly, it also suggests an effort on the part of previous generations to divorce Emerson's praised name from any intellectually controversial figures, especially Spinoza.

ultimate refusal to join the rabbinate. As early as 1831, just one year before he delivered his homily "The Lord's Supper" and renounced his pulpit, Emerson expressed a specific interest in Spinoza.[5]

II. Emerson's Reinterpretation of Spinoza's "Substance," "Attributes," and "Modes"

Though Emerson does not embrace every specific assertion contained in the *Ethics*, he certainly adopts the spirit of Spinoza's metaphysics. Outlining the schema of existence, Emerson reinterprets Spinoza's concepts of "substance," "attributes," and "modes." Associating God and substance, Spinoza expresses a philosophical viewpoint intricately tied to specific notions of "substance" and "God" that differ from any commonplace understanding of these two concepts. Spinoza defines substance as "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that the conception of which does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed" (*Ethics* 31). God, for Spinoza, is the entirety of substance (37). Emerson expresses the same concept in his journals when he postulates that "the Universe needs no outer cause but exists by its own perfection and the sum of it all is this, God is" (*Journals*[6] V 163). Just like Spinoza, Emerson associates the entirety of the universe—i.e. substance—with God. For Spinoza as for Emerson, substance or God is the most independent level of existence: both philosophers conceive of God as self-caused and constituting everything in existence (*Ethics* 34-40).

Attributes, in Spinoza's hierarchy of the order of existence, represent the next highest level of being. In his metaphysics, Spinoza defines attributes as "that which the intellect

[5] In an entry into one of his pocket diaries dated November 21, 1831, Emerson wrote a note to himself in Latin indicating his intention to research Spinoza, among other things (*JMN* III 339). I am indebted to Professor Timothy O'Keefe, with whom I consulted to translate this passage of Emerson's journal.
[6] Hereafter cited as *JMN*.

perceives of substance as constituting its essence" (31). Though God, according to Spinoza, possesses infinite attributes, Spinoza only considers thought and extension—what Emerson terms mind or the spiritual and the physical (*Ethics* 37). Though not unique to Spinoza or Emerson by any means, thought and extension play complementary roles in both thinkers' systems, for both consider these two attributes as reflective of substance itself. Notably, Emerson gives an account of thought and extension most accurately described as Spinozist: "Every correspondence we observe in mind and matter suggests a substance older and deeper than either of these old nobilities" ("Poetry and the Imagination" *Complete Works*, VIII 9). This concept embodies Spinoza's parallelism, which entails that "[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (*Ethics* 66). Spinoza maintains that each attribute exists absolutely independently of all others; therefore, thought, as an attribute of substance, gives an equally good account of God as does extension. Thought and extension, however, do not depend upon each other.

Here Emerson diverges somewhat from Spinoza's strict definitions. Asserting the hierarchical priority of spirit, Emerson claims that "[t]here seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms" and that all physical forms "preëxist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God" (*Nature*, *Complete Works* I 34). Though Emerson elsewhere suggests that spirit ought not subjugate or supersede corporeality, he clearly privileges it. While this appears contrary to Spinoza's insistence that one attribute "could not have been produced by another," Spinoza certainly hints at ascribing to mind a causal priority (*Ethics* 36). In fact, Spinoza asserts that "God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived as constituting God's essence, is in actual fact the cause of things, in respect both of their essence and their existence" (45). Thus, Emerson's

treatment of the connection between physicality and mind, while contrary to a strict reading of Spinoza's philosophy, accords with Spinoza in many important respects.

Emerson also adopts a similar understanding of Spinoza's modes. Modes, the lowest order of being in Spinoza's system, depend completely upon substance and attributes for their existence and for any conception of them, for a mode "is in something else and is conceived through something else" (*Ethics* 31). These modes constitute particularities such as individual human minds and bodies (63). In his essay "The Over-Soul" (1841), in which Emerson describes his conception of God, he delineates a relation between the parts and whole of existence similar to Spinoza's conception of the relationship between substance, attributes, and modes: "that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other . . . . We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE" (*Collected Works* II 160). Like the particular mode of substance, a human conceives of his existence only through his relation to the whole—to God. Indeed, the most fitting explanation of this aspect of Emerson's philosophy lies in an investigation of Spinoza's account of humanity and its relation to God.

Spinoza claims that "the idea of the body and the body itself—that is, mind and body—are one and the same individual thing, conceived now under the attribute of Thought and now under the attribute of Extension" (81). As modes of thought and extension, human minds and bodies "[are] in God alone and can be conceived only through God" (48). Both mind and body, therefore, "[are] related to God in the same way," and, furthermore, "the idea of God, from which infinite things follow in infinite ways, must be one, and only one" (80, 65). Essentially, these passages accounting for mankind's relation to God reappear in Emerson's "Over-Soul."

Every part of an individual—both mind and body—relates equally to God—"the eternal ONE"—and God contains every human's particular being.

Even though both thinkers understand God as the immanent cause of everything in existence, Emerson and Spinoza deny any separation between substance or God and its modes or particles. In two propositions, Spinoza, veraciously stating his position, posits that "[w]hatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" and that "God is the imminent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (*Ethics* 40, 46). Here, Spinoza asserts that God is equally the cause and effect.[7] Similarly, Emerson understands that "[c]ause and effect are two sides of one fact" and asserts that everything in the universe consists in God:

> this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. ("Circles," *Collected Works* II 186; "The Over-Soul" ibid. 160)

Like Spinoza, Emerson maintains the impossibility of isolating any part of reality from God and ascribes to God features that accord directly with Spinoza's opening definitions in the *Ethics*: God is self-caused and self-sustaining (*Ethics* 37-8).

III. Secondary Neglect

These notable similarities notwithstanding, investigations of Spinoza and Emerson fail to acknowledge the link between the two philosophers. Perhaps because much secondary literature on Emerson treats him primarily as a literary or religious figure rather than a philosopher, most

[7] Spinoza does admit some degree of distinction between cause and effect. Notwithstanding this differentiation, he does not suggest that cause and effect are constituted in different entities; therefore, he concludes that "knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, knowledge of the cause," but that "[w]hatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" (*Ethics* 32, 40).

scholarship glosses over the more philosophical influences on Emerson's thought. Consideration of philosophical sources pertinent to his work emphasizes the influence of thinkers with literary or mystical leanings such as Plato, Swedenborg, and Coleridge. Indeed, when approaching Emerson's work, scholars continually raise the question, "Does Emerson remain a man of letters, merely, who dabbled in philosophy, or is he a philosopher who chose, as the mighty Plato himself had chosen, to reformulate the thoughts of his predecessors and give them an artistic rendering?" (Gray 26). Though recent investigations of Emerson such as those by Stanley Cavell and Anthony Petruzzi acknowledge the Concord Sage as a major influence on nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy in America and Europe and as a true philosopher in his own right[8], much scholarship treats Emerson as a notable literary figure but poor philosopher, because of the lack of formal, linear reasoning within his writings. Norman Miller, for instance, says that "Emerson's philosophy, if it is informed by a logic at all, is informed by the logic of the spider web rather than that of the skyscraper; it is circular rather than linear, intuitional rather than syllogistic . . . . Tear it at one point and the whole construct falls" (381). Importantly, this description recognizes Emerson's philosophical leanings, but it privileges more conventional syllogistic reasoning by presenting Emerson's logic as circular and, therefore, vulnerable. In his essay "The Romantic Spinoza in America," Benjamin Wolfstein even denies that Spinoza influences American philosophy directly. Instead, he posits that the St. Louis Hegelians, led by Henry Conrad Brokmeyer and William Torrey Harris, encounter Spinoza in the antebellum period through their readings of Hegel: "it was largely through Spinoza's direct influence on Hegel that he indirectly influenced American thought" (439). Indeed, Wolfstein fails to recognize any link, direct or indirect, between Spinoza and the American Transcendentalists,

[8] See Cavell for a discussion of Emerson's influence on Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Logical Positivism and Petruzzi's for treatment of Emerson's influence on Heidegger.

claiming instead that "New England transcendentalists [sic] actually brought Kant to America when they introduced Coleridge" (439). In a magnificent intellectual biography of Emerson entitled *God in Concord*, Richard Geldard delves into Emerson's journals, correspondence, personal experience, and published works in an attempt to ascertain and present his intellectual and spiritual progression. Nowhere in this work, though, does Geldard mention Spinoza or his influence on Emerson. Henry David Gray, in his *Emerson: A Statement of New England Transcendentalism as Expressed in the Philosophy of Its Chief Exponent*, recognizes similarities to Spinoza in Emerson's philosophy, but he points them out off-handedly in order to accentuate dissimilarities between Emerson and Kant.[9]

More recent investigations concerning Emerson's holistic cosmology and monistic tendencies have chiefly investigated the connection between Emerson and Plato. In his "Emerson on Plato: The Fire's Center," Ray Benoit, describing Emerson as a "monistic dualist," observes that he, "by interpreting Plato . . . chose neither spirit nor matter but viewed each as aspects of a ground of being, if you will, higher than both" (488). In his essay "Poetry and Imagination," Emerson does indeed insist that the fundamental unity of material and spiritual substance, correctly understood, points to a plane of existence higher than both: "Every correspondence we observe in mind and matter suggests a substance older and deeper than either of these old nobilities" (*Complete Works*, VIII 9). Benoit, through his account, characterizes Emerson's philosophy as dualistic in its notion of a two-fold reality, yet also monistic by virtue of Emerson's insistence that a unity more fundamental than its composite parts informs the whole of reality. This description of Emerson's worldview, especially when considered in concert with many other of Emerson's metaphysical postulations, echoes Spinoza's parallelism

[9] Gray, discussing Emerson's conception of God, says, "in his recognition of 'boundless space and boundless time' as 'the two cardinal conditions' of nature . . . , he shows clearly that his conception was at best really Spinoza's and

more closely than Plato's dualism: "thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that" (*Ethics* 67). Conveying Emerson's parallelism even more accurately, Norman Miller remarks that Emerson sees nature as "a material though dynamic representation of a spiritual world, corresponding to that other, at any moment, part for part" (388). Despite Emerson's parallelism, monism, and recognition of Spinoza specifically in numerous lectures, essays, and journals, scholarship on Emerson continues to investigate his philosophy without recognizing Spinoza's important influence.

IV. The Spinoza Controversy

From his lifetime up to the nineteenth century, Spinoza was a controversial figure in the philosophical world. Debate surrounded the theological and philosophical implications of his metaphysical, ethical, and religious theories. The constant controversy surrounding Spinoza's philosophy lead to gross misinterpretations on both sides of the argument; as a result, centuries elapsed between Spinoza's lifetime and the possibility of a dispassionate readership. The seventeenth-century French philosopher Pierre Bayle wrote a lengthy article attacking Spinoza's philosophy and its followers in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697). Because of its wide readership, Bayle's *Dictionary* influenced many professional and lay philosophers even into the nineteenth century. In fact, Emerson borrowed Bayle's 5-volume *Dictionary* from the Harvard library in February of 1824 and referenced it on numerous occasions in his journals (Cameron 45).

Bayle's article influenced Spinoza's reception tremendously because "many readers came to know Spinozism through the summary he gave" (Moreau 3). Bayle, in his account of

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not Kant's" (66).

Spinoza, "caricatures the doctrine by not distinguishing between *natura naturans* ('nature naturing') and *natura naturata* ('nature natured') and by treating the relation of modes to substance as a mechanical identity" (Moreau 3).[10] The conflation of these two crucial concepts colors many of the debates surrounding Spinoza's philosophy, including those between Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and, importantly, between Andrews Norton and George Ripley.[11] Following this misreading of Spinoza's philosophy to its logical end, Bayle accuses Spinoza of atheism and fatalism. Attacking Spinoza's association of God and substance, Bayle claims, "[t]hat according to Spinoza God and extension are the same thing" (302). Since Spinoza considers extension an attribute of God, Bayle reads that as equating God and corporeal matter. In fact, Bayle claims that Spinoza, "along with all other philosophers, [admits] that the attribute of a substance does not differ actually from that substance" (302-3). Following this line of reasoning, Bayle interprets Spinoza's philosophy as materialistic atheism in the guise of theism. This interpretation, however, misses a crucial aspect of Spinoza's definition of "attribute." Contrary to Bayle's assertion that Spinoza equates substance and attribute—thereby equating God and corporeality—Spinoza identifies the attribute of a substance as "that which the *intellect* perceives of substance as constituting its essence" (Spinoza, *Ethics* 31; my italics). Following his reasoning regarding the relationship between substance and attributes, Bayle makes similar assertions about attributes and modes: "It is . . . necessary that it [substance]

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[10] The distinction between these two terms is subtle and important. The first term, *natura naturans* connotes the activity of growing or germination, while the latter, *natura naturata*, expresses nature as already created: "The phrase 'Natura Naturans' is a Scholastic term, in which the word 'naturans' is the active participle, 'nature naturing,' which for Spinoza connotes the active aspect of God, or nature. Here God is described as manifesting infinite energy, or power. The phrase 'Natura Naturata,' 'nature natured,' however contains the passive participle, 'naturata,' signifying nature as produced and referring to the modes" (Shirley 11). Spinoza himself associates *natura naturans* with "the attributes of substance that express eternal and infinite essence; or…God in so far as he is considered a free cause" (*Ethics* 52). As the passive aspect of God, Spinoza understands *natura naturata* as "all that follows from the necessity . . . of each one of God's attributes; or all the modes of God's attributes in so far as they are considered as things which are in God and can neither be nor be conceived without God" (*Ethics* 52).

[11] See below.

multiply itself in proportion as incompatible modifications are multiplied among themselves, so that wherever there are five or six of these modifications, there are also five or six substances" (306). Pursuant to this argument, Bayle accuses Spinoza of breaking the logical law of the excluded middle: "two opposite terms cannot be truly affirmed of the same subject, in the same respect, and at the same time" (Bayle 309). Here, however, Bayle uses "substance" and "subject" synonymously, but this obfuscates Spinoza's meaning. In fact, Spinoza does not equate substance and subjects; rather, he describes infinite and finite modes as modifications of the infinite attributes of substance (*Ethics* 48-51). From these few prevaricating misinterpretations, Bayle represents Spinoza as a systemic atheist.

His derision of Spinoza notwithstanding, Bayle's *Dictionary* gained wide readership for centuries after his death. Despite the number of people who acquainted themselves with Spinoza's philosophy through Bayle's article, however, it is doubtful that many serious scholars accepted Bayle's critique. In fact, because of his unsound interpretation, "people told Bayle that he did not understand Spinoza's theory and that he should get somebody to explain it to him" (Popkin 117). Ultimately, though, Bayle refused to revise his representation of Spinoza, arguing "that there is no way of stating atheism coherently" (Popkin 117). Curiously enough, in his debate with Johann Gottfried von Herder, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi offers a similar reading, in which he denounces Spinoza as a fatalistic atheist.

Jacobi and Herder represented the most outspoken and diametrically opposed voices in the Spinoza debate during the Enlightenment period in Germany. Herder, a vociferous defender of Spinoza, responded directly to Jacobi's anti-Spinozist and, indeed, anti-Rationalist publications. Targeting much of Enlightenment philosophy, "Jacobi saw Spinoza . . . as the supreme representative of the tradition of speculative rationalism, which he was determined to

discredit" (Bell 78). Like Bayle, Jacobi sought "to reveal that the very nature of Spinoza's method and premises was inherently atheistic" (Bell 80). Using similar tactics as Bayle, Jacobi rejected any distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. In fact, in his work *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, Jacobi actually defends Bayle against Mendelssohn's claim that the French *philosophe* had misunderstood Spinoza's philosophy; however, Jacobi, far from accepting Bayle's critique blindly, recognizes its limitations: "Bayle did not misunderstand Spinoza's system…one can only say that he did not understand . . . its foundations according to the mind of its creator [Spinoza]" (49; my translations). Preceding this comment on Bayle's article in the *Historical Critical Dictionary*, Jacobi posits that any "determinist must become a fatalist, if he wishes to remain consistent" (23-4). In all fairness, Jacobi's critique involved a much more sophisticated treatment of Spinoza's philosophy than Bayle ever mastered.

Rather than equating substance and its attributes—thereby equating God with extension—Jacobi finds the relationship between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* problematic. Spinoza, says Jacobi, in positing an infinite, immutable substance, does not account for the causal relationship between it and its particular, finite, and changeable modes and attributes: "every particular concept originates in another particular concept and must relate immediately to an actually existing object, [but] the first cause, which is of infinite nature, has neither particular thoughts nor a definite will" (25). Jacobi further criticizes Spinoza for his failure to distinguish between a cause and the thing caused: "He [Spinoza] rejected . . . all transient causes, secondary or remote, and posited in place of the Emanating a strictly imminent infinity [Ensoph], an indwelling and in itself infinitely immutable origin of the world that, taken together with all that follows from it, would be one and the same" (24). Spinoza, rejecting any

notion of a personal God, could not explain the connection between the infinite whole and the particulars that follow from it; though, according to Jacobi, he simply asserted their oneness. Spinoza's God, says Jacobi,

> is the genuine principle of reality in all that is real, of existence in all that exits, without individuality and absolutely infinite. The unity of this God is founded upon the identity of that which cannot be differentiated and, consequently, does not exclude any sort of plurality. Taken merely in light of its transcendental unity, however, this God must lack any reality that can only be found in particular entities. (45-6)

Therefore, Spinoza lacks the means to explain any relationship between substance and its particular modes and attributes. In fact, Jacobi says of Spinoza that he "should have ascribed to every creature two souls: one corresponding to present, particular things and one corresponding to the Whole" (28). Furthermore, because of his strict adherence to a deterministic system and denial of any free will, Spinoza, in Jacobi's view, advocated a fatalistic philosophy (26-7). Jacobi thus accuses Spinoza of isolating God from the world and adhering to a mechanistically fatalistic system.

Herder fought against the destructive claims made by Bayle and Jacobi, but in his insistent assertions of Spinoza's theism, Herder actually portrays Spinoza as a dualistic idealist who identifies God as an incorporeal entity. Both Bayle and Jacobi attack Spinoza on his understanding of extended substance. Underscoring the apparent divisibility of corporeal matter, Bayle asserts that "[i]f it is absurd to make God extended because this would divest him of his simplicity and make him consist of an infinite number of parts, what will we say when we consider that this is reducing him to the condition of matter, the lowest of all beings" (307). Responding to these claims in Spinoza's defense, Herder makes a wholehearted attempt to

divorce Spinoza's God from corporeality: "no part of the world can also be part of God, because the simple highest Essence has no parts whatsoever. I now see clearly that our philosopher has been unjustly accused of pantheism as of atheism" (107). Instead, Herder understands Spinoza's modes as "expressions of divine force, products of an immanent eternal activity of God in the world" (108). Insisting that Spinoza prioritizes thought over all other attributes of substance, Herder portrays Spinoza as privileging intellect over physical matter (Herder 141). Therefore, Herder's defense, in its alacrity, presents Spinoza as a dualistic idealist, who places thought above extension as the highest attribute of God (Bell 113). Though this interpretation contrasts the spirit of Spinoza's metaphysics as a whole, certain aspects of Spinoza's philosophy support such assertions. In his chapter "On God," for instance, Spinoza asserts that "the truth and formal essence of things is what it is because it exists as such in the intellect of God as an object of thought. Therefore, God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived as constituting God's essence, is in actual fact the cause of things, in respect both of their essence and their existence" (*Ethics* 45). However, Herder reads such utterances as subjugating Spinoza's parallel claims that "God's existence and his essence are one and the same" (46). Spinoza's claim that God's intellect, in so far as it constitutes his essence, "is in actual fact the cause of things," therefore, quite literally means that God causes everything. Furthermore, Spinoza says "that which is caused differs from its cause precisely in what it has from its cause" (45); this iteration seems to justify Herder's claim that Spinoza draws a fundamental distinction between God and the world—since God causes the world to exist. In this instance, too, though, Spinoza does not separate God from the world. Rather, Spinoza offers this example as clarification: "God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived as constituting the divine essence, differs from man's intellect both in respect of essence and existence" (46). This distinction, however, is conceptual, not ontological. Spinoza

uses this example to discourage drawing inferences about God from human traits, not to separate God from the world. Immediately before this discussion, in fact, Spinoza asserts that "[w]hatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God" (40). Therefore, Spinoza's philosophy, though it contains elements of dualistic idealism—hinting at a cosmology that treats God as a purely intellectual entity, separate from all extended things—he does not consider humanity or the world as apart from God. He does, however, discourage any view equating God with the world or ascribing characteristics to God based on the constitution of humanity. Herder's interpretation, therefore, incorrectly implicates Spinoza as a dualist.[12]

V. Emerson on the Spinoza Controversy

Familiar with Spinoza's sullied name and Bayle's account of Spinoza, Emerson approached the Spinoza debate with despondence. Referencing the general sentiment toward Spinoza in the American landscape, Emerson made the following entry into his journal:

> In America we are such rowdies in church &state, and the very boys are so soon ripe, that I think no philosophical skepticism will make much sensation. Spinosa [sic] pronounced that there was but one substance;--yea, verily; but that boy yonder told me yesterday he thought the pinelog was God, & that God was in the jakes. What can Spinoza tell the boy? (*JMN* IX 103-4)

A footnote to this entry indicates that Emerson had originally written "What can Spinoza add?" in place of "What can Spinoza tell the boy?" This passage, particularly the original entry, indicates that Emerson perceiving the debate surrounding Spinoza as ludicrous. The boy says that "the pinelog [is] God & that God [is] in the jakes," an utterance reminiscent of pantheism, but precisely the pantheism falsely ascribed to Spinoza. Emerson here betrays a more nuanced

[12] For a more comprehensive discussion of how Spinoza incorporates dualistic elements into his philosophy while remaining a monist, see Donagan.

understanding of Spinoza's philosophy than some of the Spinoza's critics. Indeed, Spinoza himself can add nothing to the intellectual, religious, and political controversies in the United States, because the ideas put forth go beyond any heresy that Spinoza may ever have committed. Furthermore, Emerson suggests that any reading of Spinoza that adopts the "boy's" perspective—saying, for instance that God is a pinelog or merely some other extended thing—is plainly wrong.

In a later lecture entitled "Essential Principles of Religion," Emerson expounds upon his sentiment toward Spinoza: "Can any one doubt that if . . . Buddha and Menu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse,--they would all find themselves of one religion,--would find themselves denounced by their own sects, and sustained by these believed adversaries of their sects" (*Later Lectures* 273). Emerson understood the fundamental principles of Spinoza's metaphysics and religious philosophy and, hence, appreciated the degree to which the many in the intellectual community denounced him. Having read Bayle, Herder, and Jacobi, Emerson most likely knew the specifics of the debate surrounding Spinoza's philosophy. Indeed, Emerson quotes Bayle's approach to philosophical analysis:

> '*Philosophy,*' said Bayle, 'may be compared to certain powders so very corrosive that having consumed the proud & spongy flesh of the wound, they would corrode even the quick & sound flesh rot the bones penetrate to the very marrow. Philosophy is proper at first to confute errors, but if she be not stopped there, she attacks truth itself, and when she has her full scope she generally goes so far as that she loses herself & knows not where to stop.' (*JMN* VI 9)

Immediately following this quotation, however, Emerson cites Alexander Pope in response: "Alike in ignorance, his reason such, Whether he thinks too little or too much" (9). This commentary on Bayle suggests both an intimate familiarity with his works and a rejection of his understanding of philosophy. His assessment of the current trends in religion and politics in America in comparison with the controversy surrounding Spinoza's name indicate, furthermore, that Spinoza found the situation deplorable.

VI. Spinoza Anathema: The Norton-Ripley Debate

Emerson had read both Herder and Jacobi prior to the delivery of his most infamous lecture, "The Divinity School Address," in 1838 (Cameron 23, 47). Even in Emerson's time, Spinoza represented an intellectual figure whose name evoked fear and hatred.[13] Not surprisingly, then, when his controversial address prompted Andrews Norton, a prominent Unitarian minister, to denounce Emerson and the emerging Transcendentalist movement as Spinozistic and, therefore, atheistic, Emerson did not respond directly.

Andrews Norton, in his *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, draws parallels between Spinoza, Hume, and other secular philosophers and the emerging Transcendentalist sentiments. Delivered to the Alumni Association at the Cambridge School of Theology, the fiery denunciation of non-sectarianism inspired George Ripley, a Unitarian minister and Transcendentalist, to respond. The subsequent debate, carried out through correspondence, spans hundreds of pages and deals with Spinoza, Hume, and others. Although Emerson's "Divinity School Address" kindled the argument, Emerson himself never actually took part or engaged Norton directly. Still, the spirit and content of the debate illustrate the divisiveness of Emerson's radical religious philosophy, Spinoza's definite presence in Transcendentalist circles,

[13] In an 1868 journal entry, Emerson, in a passage entitled "Revolutions," remarked, "[i]n my youth Spinoza was a hobgoblin: now he is a saint" (*JMN* XVI 99).

and the degree to which this perceived threat caused Norton, a once liberal minister, suddenly and unapologetically to reject dialogue and view Christianity as a monolith.

While Norton, in his actual speech, concerns himself primarily with Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* and, more to the point, with the denial of miracles, the argument between Norton and Ripley transformed into a debate about the proper interpretation of Spinoza's metaphysics and theology. This debate illustrates the degree to which Spinozism divided the Unitarian ministry in early nineteenth-century America. The notion that Spinoza's controversial metaphysics and biblical interpretation could infiltrate the Unitarian clergy, stirring them to question some of the basic tenets of Christian faith—as exemplified in Emerson's renunciation sermon, "The Lord's Supper"—proved most problematic to Norton and others in the Unitarian ministry.

In his *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity*, Norton refers to Spinoza as "the celebrated atheist" and claims that the resurgence of Spinozism undermines the truth of Christianity (9). Speaking of Emerson and the emergence of American Transcendentalism in no uncertain terms, Norton warns that while these infidels claim to be Christians, they, in fact, deny the most basic tenets of Christianity: "The latest form of infidelity is distinguished by assuming the Christian name, while it strikes directly at the root of faith in Christianity, and indirectly of all religion, by denying the miracles attesting the divine mission of Christ" (11). Norton here refers directly to Emerson's "Divinity School Address" (1838), in which he denies miracles and describes Jesus as a prophet rather than God (*Complete Works* I 128-31).

Ripley, defending American Transcendentalism and Spinozism in an anonymously published pamphlet called, *A Letter to Mr. Andrews Norton*, criticizes Norton for his misrepresentation of Spinoza and his message of wholesale denunciation rather than dialogue.

Quoting Francis W. P. Greenwood, a fellow minister and editor of *The Unitarian Miscellany and Christian Monitor* (1824 to 1826), Ripley describes the spirit of the Harvard Divinity School as an environment contrary to the attitude expressed in Norton's inflammatory speech: "It regards spiritual pride and arrogance as worse than false doctrine . . . . Exclusiveness is its utter aversion. Exclusive Christianity is its unspeakable wonder. It regards exclusive religion as quite as great a contradiction as an exclusive God" (9). In fact, Ripley deprecates the harshness of Norton's position based on his own record. Seeing Norton's position as contrary to Unitarianism and, therefore, to Norton's own office as a Unitarian minister, Ripley says, "you lose sight of the basis of our Christian union, and advance principles which have been repudiated by our churches, which are at war with the spirit of society among us, and which threaten, if carried into effect, to disorganize and confound our dearest religious institutions" (155). Norton's fear that the ever more popular Transcendentalist beliefs spreading through the Unitarian population could dilute Christian doctrine beyond the point of recognition motivated his unilateral denunciation of philosophical positions that influenced Emerson's credo. Emerson was a natural target for Norton's *Discourse*, because as a public lecturer and former minister, he represented one of the most well-known proponents of Transcendentalism.

VII. Ripley's Defense

The debate between Norton and Ripley did not, however, focus solely on the inappropriateness of Norton's fiery harangue. Ripley directly challenged the validity of Norton's interpretation of Spinoza. For instance, Ripley contradicts Norton's assertion that "[t]o deny the atheism of Spinoza, is merely to contend that the word is not to be used in its common and established sense" and further accuses him of equating God with nature (45, 9-10). Defending Spinoza against these allegations of pantheism, Ripley insists that "[h]e was a pantheist in the

philosophical sense only; by this is meant that he denied real, substantial existence to finite objects; all apparent life is in truth the divine life" (125). Subsequent to this assertion, Ripley cites multiple Spinoza scholars such as Herder and Victor Cousin in support of his argument.

Ripley's defense, though, actually illustrates that he misread Spinoza to a certain degree as well. Drawing heavily on sources like Herder, Ripley's *apologia* overcompensates in its defense, portraying Spinoza as a philosopher who venerated the idea of God while subjugating material and human existence. Ripley quotes Cousin, for instance, as asserting that "Spinoza has such a deep sense of the existence of God, that he loses all sense of the existence of man" (Cousin qtd. in Ripley 130). In this manner, Ripley sees Spinoza as subjugating material existence for a higher plane. But this summation inaccurately describes Spinoza's system. Though employed to defend against charges of atheism, Ripley's interpretation of Spinoza colors him as an idealist. In fact, Spinoza's metaphysics uplifts material and human existence, for each represents an aspect of God: "All things . . . are in God, and all things that come to pass do so only through the laws of God's infinite nature and follow from the necessity of his essence . . . . Therefore by no manner of reasoning can it be said that . . . extended substance is unworthy of divine nature" (Spinoza, *Ethics* 43). Ripley's defense of Spinoza, therefore, illustrates that throughout the eighteenth century, philosophers like Cousin and Herder misrepresented Spinoza. Such secondary accounts of Spinoza's system inform Ripley's defense against accusations of atheism and indicate his own tendency to present Spinoza as bordering on idealism—subjugating physical or extended existence in favor of incorporeal and true substance.

VIII. Emerson and Spinoza on Religion and Scripture

Norton's malediction of Emerson rings true, to some extent. Emerson openly claims that subsequent generations convoluted Jesus' message and that Christianity, as a religion, had gone

astray from the moment of its inception, shortly after Jesus' death. Furthermore, in his "Divinity School Address," Emerson denies miracles in the traditional sense: "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain" (*Complete Works* I 129). This denial mirrors Spinoza's claim that "a miracle is wrought in, and not beyond nature" (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 87). Rather than understanding miracles as acts reflecting God's direct intervention in nature, both Emerson and Spinoza perceive them as affirming God's oneness with nature.

Emerson calls Christianity misguided in its vehement denial of Christ's humanness. Seeing Christ's humanity as the crux of Jesus' religious philosophy, Emerson says that Jesus "saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World . . . . But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages!" (*Complete Works* I 128-9). Jesus' message, claims Emerson, resides in his estimation of humanity's greatness (ibid. 128-9). Obfuscating this teaching, subsequent generations – indeed, his own disciples—deified Jesus, thus falling "into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion" (ibid. 130). Advocating a recognition of humanity's divinity rather than the deification of one historical figure, Emerson actually describes Christianity as 'demonology' in its exaggeration of "the individual nature . . . beyond its due bounds" (*JMN* VII 167).[14] Jesus, says Emerson, rather than affirming his own divinity, venerated all of humanity.

Spinoza, like Emerson, describes Christ as a conveyor truth. In fact, Spinoza even asserts that only Jesus received God's message directly, for, though God appeared to other prophets

[14] Importantly, when Emerson uses the term "demonology," he most likely refers to a meaning close to the original Greek *daimon*, meaning "deity" or "genius" and does not imply any of the negative connotations associated with the contemporary English word "demon" ("Demon"). Thus, when Emerson alludes to Christianity as demonology, he does so merely to emphasize their exaggeration of Christ's character.

through imagination or physical manifestation, “Christ communed with God mind to mind” (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 19). However, Spinoza does not endorse Christ’s divinity. Rejecting any anthropomorphisms of God, Spinoza also rejects the possibility of God instantiating Himself, in his entirety, in any human form.

Corollary to these views on God and religion, both Spinoza and Emerson treat the Bible deferentially, but neither accepts it as the pristine word of God. Giving the topic particular attention, Spinoza, after painstaking investigation, concludes that “Scripture has come down to us intact in respect to its doctrines and main narratives” (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 197). However, Spinoza also recognizes “that Scripture consists of different books, written at different times, for different people, by different authors” (192). In this sense, then, though he accepts it as a relatively accurate narrative containing valuable doctrines, he does not accept the Bible as God’s word in the sense of literal dictation; rather, Spinoza insists that “the meaning of Scripture should be gathered from its own history” (195). Emerson expresses a parallel view on exegesis when, in his sermon “The Lord’s Supper,” he offers justification for refusing to perform the Eucharist:

> still it may be asked, Why did Jesus make expressions so extraordinary and emphatic as these—‘This is my body which is broken for you. Take; eat. This is my blood which is shed for you. Drink it’?—I reply they are not extraordinary expressions from him. They were familiar in his mouth. He always taught by parables and symbols. It was the national way of teaching, and was largely used by him. (*Complete Works* XI 9-10)

In this passage, Emerson proposes an interpretation of the Bible in light of its historical context. He rejects the literal sense of Jesus’ metaphorical teachings.

The crux of Emerson's treatment of the bible, that it relays truths but should not constrict humanity, concords with Spinoza's basic principles of biblical interpretation. Emerson does not consider the bible the living word of God; rather, he sees it as a carbon-copy of a once-breathing estimation of divine truth. To Spinoza as to Emerson, the revelation of truth is an ongoing process, and Emerson, therefore, berates religious opinions that insist "that the Bible is closed" ("Divinity School Address" *Complete Works* I 144). Furthermore, Emerson dismisses those who "speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead" and points out that "the need was never greater of new revelation than now" (ibid. 134, 135). Not only do these claims accord with Spinoza's interpretation of the bible as "written at different times, for different people, by different authors" but it mirrors Spinoza's referring to the bible as "the dead letter" (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 192). As a consequence of exaggerating biblical authority, says Spinoza, "[m]en think it pious to trust nothing to reason and their own judgment, and impious to doubt the faith of those who have transmitted to us the sacred books"; however, Spinoza continues, "[s]uch conduct is not piety, but mere folly" (192). Indeed, Emerson relays precisely this sentiment when he says that "Courage, piety, love, wisdom, can teach; and every man can open his door to these angels, and they shall bring him the gift of tongues. But the man who aims to speak as books enable, as synods use, as the fashion guides, and as interest commands, babbles. Let him hush" ("Divinity School Address" 135). The crux of Emerson's view on religion—his understanding of the revelation of divine truth as a continual process—appears in Spinoza's own account of the role of scripture within religion. Furthermore, in denying miracles and insisting upon a historical understanding of the bible Emerson adopts a stance in the same spirit as Spinoza's.

IX. Spinoza and Emerson on God: "There is no personëity in it"

True to his statement regarding the "demonology" of Christianity, Emerson rejects the notion of a personal God. Because he associates God with the Universe existing "by its own perfection," Emerson sternly denies the possibility of ascribing to God a personhood: "we were taught that God is here no respecter of persons, that into that communion with him which is absolute life, & where names & ceremonies & traditions are no longer known, but the virtues are loved for their loveliness alone, for their conformity to God;--in that communion our dearest friends are strangers. There is no personëity in it" (*JMN* V 163, 170). Seeing God as absolute truth and goodness, Emerson understands communion with his Over-soul as necessarily dissimilar to any inter-personal relation.

On the relationship between humans and God, Emerson stresses most people's inability to appreciate the true nature of God. Humans, says Emerson, "apprehend the relative as flowing from the absolute & . . . shall always give the Absolute a name" (*JMN* V 163). Indeed, Emerson frowns upon the tendencies of those he calls "cultivated men," who "when [they] . . . speak of God . . . demand a biography of him as steadily as the kitchen & the bar room demand personalities in men" (*JMN* V 162). Spinoza points out the dangers of conceiving of God as an anthropomorphic entity with human-like intention and emotion; referring to these views as "prejudices," Spinoza says that people, "looking on things as means . . . could not believe them to be self-created, but on the analogy of the means which they are accustomed to produce for themselves, they were bound to conclude that there was some governor or governors of Nature, endowed with human freedom, who have attended to all their needs and made everything for their use" (*Ethics* 58). Even denying the notion that God possesses freedom, Spinoza asserts, "God does not act from freedom of will"; though, he does believe that "all natural phenomena . . . must be determined by God . . . to exist and to act in a definite way" (53). Thus, Spinoza

accepts God as the immanent cause of all things and thinks that "[w]hatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God," but he refuses to countenance the idea that God possesses dominion over the laws of nature or reason (40). Thinking it folly to conceive of God as separated from nature and exercising control by displacing the laws of nature at will, Spinoza explains

> it is plain that the universal laws of nature are decrees of God following from the necessity and perfection of the Divine nature. Hence, any event happening in nature which contravened nature's universal laws, would necessarily also contravene the Divine decree, nature, and understanding; or if anyone asserted that God acts in contravention to the laws of nature, he, *ipso facto*, would be compelled to assert that God acted against His own nature—an evident absurdity. (*Theologico-Political Treatise* 83)

Considering the immutable laws of nature as the laws according to which God acts and thinking of God as an entity without human features, Spinoza rejects any possibility of a personal relationship with God. Spinoza, denying that "God has made everything for man's sake and has made man so that he should worship God," thinks it delusional to believe that God favors those who worship him in one way rather than another. Whereas both Emerson and Spinoza point out the dangers of thinking of God in anthropomorphic terms, Emerson thinks it quite natural for humans to "apprehend the relative as flowing from the absolute." Significantly, Emerson refers to those who think of God in such terms derisively as "cultivated men," but does not disparage such viewpoints to the extent that Spinoza does.

Given his account of the true nature of the divine, however, and his understanding of humanity's relation to the Over-soul, Emerson's theological model is highly Spinozistic. Like Spinoza, Emerson understands God as the indwelling cause of all things, a force never removed

from nature or any aspect of existence: "this deep power in which we exist [the Over-Soul] and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object are one" ("Over-Soul," *Collected Works* II 160). Corollary to his conception of the unity of God and the world, Emerson understands God as inherent in all existence to such an extent that He constitutes everything in the universe.

X. The Truth Itself

Though Emerson's incorporation of doctrines and ideas central to Spinoza's philosophy suggests almost unequivocal acceptance of Spinoza's system, Emerson imported Spinozistic ideas rather selectively. In fact, Emerson never actually quotes Spinoza specifically in his own writing, and in a journal entry from 1843 he explains why:

> Swedenborg, Behmen, Spinoza, will appear original to uninstructed and to thoughtless persons. Their originality will disappear to such as are either well-read or thoughtful. For scholars will recognize their thoughts . . . as reappearing in men of a similar intellectual elevation throughout history; and a thinker or a man through whom shineth that light which is older than intellect, and through which alone intellect is a god, will undervalue each reporter when he beholds the splendor of the truth itself . . . to such as quote their words instead of listening to the truth itself, they falsify the truth: for his book is not truth, but truth Swedenborgized or Behmenized or Spinozised. (*JMN* VIII 380)

Clearly, then, Emerson understands Spinoza as a propounder of truth, but in an attempt to relay his own ideas most pristinely, Emerson refrains from quoting Spinoza verbatim. Rather, he listens to "the truth itself" in Spinoza's writing and incorporates it into his own philosophy.

The notion of recognizing the truth in philosophical theories rather than adulating specific thinkers informs Emerson's attitude toward Spinoza. In unequivocal terms, Emerson advocates scrutinizing readings of philosophers: "Insist that . . . whoever propounds to you an Ontology, is only a more or less awkward translator of entities in your consciousness which you have also your own way of seeing, perhaps demonstrating" (*JMN* V 390). Emerson thus sees Spinoza's theories as rough approximations of his own ideas, but the truth itself informs that approximation, according to Emerson. Insofar as the truth concerns him, he sees Spinoza as simply a catalyst and, therefore, as secondary to the truth itself. This sentiment explains why Emerson rarely cites him as a primary influence. Plainly, Emerson sees the ideas themselves as influential and Spinoza not as the originator but as a conduit facilitating their transmission.

XI. Humanity Through *Natura Naturans* and *Natura Naturata*

The philosophical concepts *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* play a crucial role in Spinoza's philosophy. As aforementioned, confusion and debate about these concepts resulted in centuries of strife over Spinoza's philosophy. These concepts appear in Emerson's writings as well; however, Emerson incorporates *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* quite differently than Spinoza uses them. Corollary to his views on humanity, Emerson associates *natura naturans* with Nature acting—natural processes—and *natura naturata* passive nature, under observance by humans.

Spinoza understands *natura naturans* as "a being that we conceive clearly and distinctly through itself, and without needing anything beside itself" (*Short Treatise* 58). Later on in his *Ethics*, Spinoza refines his understanding of *natura naturans* as "the attributes of substance that express eternal and infinite essence" (52). Thought and extension, then, as infinite attributes of substance constitute *natura naturans*. On the other hand, Spinoza defines two types of *natura*

naturata: general and particular. General *natura naturata* "consists of all the modes which depend immediately on God"; particular *natura naturata*, however, "consists of all the particular things which are produced by the general mode" (*Short Treatise* 58). In his *Ethics*, Spinoza eschews the distinction between general and particular and defines *natura naturata* as "all that follows from the necessity of God's nature, that is, from the necessity of each one of God's attributes; or all the modes of God's attributes in so far as they are considered as things which are in God and can neither be nor be conceived without God" (52). Thus, in Spinoza's philosophy, these two terms connote conceptual relations: *natura naturans* represents conceptually independent attributes, whereas *natura naturata* consists of dependent modes.

As illustrative of nature in itself, *natura naturans*, according to Emerson's understanding, instantiates "the Efficient Nature" or "the quick cause before which all forms flee as the driven snows; itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes . . . and in undescribable variety" ("Nature," *Collected Works* III 104). This efficient nature, in Emerson's view, "publishes itself in creatures, reaching from particles and spiculæ through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a shock or a leap" (ibid. 104). *Natura naturans*, for Emerson, then, entails nature apart from any subject—nature in itself. Considering *natura naturans* in terms of the lifespan of Nature itself, Emerson stipulates "boundless space and boundless time" as its "two cardinal conditions" (104). As in Spinoza's philosophy, *natura naturans* consists of nature in terms of its infinite properties. For Emerson, however, these include space and time—rather than thought, extension, and the rest of the infinity of attributes endemic to Spinozistic substance.

Natura naturata in Emerson's philosophy correlates quite directly to humanity, and in a manner of speaking, the same assertion holds true of Spinoza's philosophy: since humans exist

as finite modes of God's infinite intellect and extension, they constitute *natura naturata*. In Emerson's writing, *natura naturata* gets the succinct definition "nature passive"[15] (ibid. 103). Supplementary to this definition, Emerson says, "Nature is loved by what is best in us . . . the beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking, until the landscape has human figures that are as good as itself" (104). Nature passive, as construed by Emerson, becomes nature in relation to humanity, and in this relation, "[l]iterature, poetry, science are the homage of man to this unfathomed secret, concerning which no sane man can affect an indifference or incuriosity" (103). Thus, though described in different terms than in Spinoza's philosophy, *natura naturata* in Emerson's writing takes on a similar character. Viewed through humanity, *natura naturata* embodies nature conceived of through finite modes of Spinoza's infinite attributes of substance.

XII. Emerson and Spinoza on Parallelism, Dualistic Idealism, and Unity

His personal attitude regarding the nature of truth notwithstanding, Emerson draws heavily on Spinozist ideas. In his first book, *Nature*, the most detailed description of his cosmology, Emerson imports some of the most fundamental concepts from Spinoza's philosophy: parallelism, a rejection of idealistic dualism, and sense of unity. Spinoza's assertion that "[t]he idea of God, from which infinite things follow in infinite ways, must be one, and one only" predicates the notion of parallelism (*Ethics* 65). This idea has profound consequences on Spinoza's metaphysical system as a whole; however, the result of this reasoning most pertinent to the notion of parallelism is that "thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. So, too, a mode of Extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways" (67). Spinoza, therefore, in associating God with substance, sees attributes as reflective of the nature

[15] Most likely, Emerson draws this definition from the grammatical structure of *natura naturata* as the passive participle (see note 9).

of substance in manifold ways. Thought and extension, the two attributes characteristic of human existence (70-1) thus constitute the same substance expressed in two different ways.

Emerson imports this notion of parallelism, but he eschews the rigor of Spinoza's account and privileges spiritual existence. Not committing himself to accounting for infinite attributes, Emerson focuses only on thought and extension: "[t]here seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preëxist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of the Spirit . . . . [Thus] visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world" (*Nature*, *Complete Works* I 34-5). Though he privileges the incorporeal, spiritual aspect of existence, this in no way mitigates Emerson's conviction that the "order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things . . . whatever follows formally from the infinite nature of God, all this follows from the idea of God with the same order and the same connection, as an object of thought in God" (Spinoza, *Ethics* 66-7). In fact, Emerson describes corporeality as dross from the mind of God, but he employs the metaphor to illustrate that physical matter "stand[s] as the apparition of God" and not to subjugate the physical aspect of existence in any way (*Nature* 62). In an even stronger assertion more closely resonating concordance with Spinoza's parallelistic monism, Emerson exclaims, "perfect parallelism between the laws of Nature and the laws of thought exist" ("Poetry and Imagination," *Complete Works* VIII 8). Emerson very much agrees with Spinoza in his postulation that both intellection and extension express God in different ways. Like Spinoza, Emerson associates God with the totality of substance and all its modes of expression, but in his characteristically unsystematic fashion, Emerson more closely associates God with spirituality or intellect than corporeality.

Describing physical existence as the apparition of God, Emerson very nearly asserts himself as a dualistic idealist à la Plato. Perhaps symptomatic of his metaphorical reasoning and analogical description, a certain disparity between spiritual and extended substance follows from Emerson's cosmology. However, Emerson strongly cautions against inferring any separation and emphasizes the shortcomings of metaphysical systems that do not regard physical matter as real:

> Idealism saith: matter is phenomenon, not a substance. Idealism acquaints us with the total disparity between the evidence of our own being and the evidence of the world's being . . . . Yet, if it only deny the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. (*Nature*, *Complete Works* I 62-3)

Emerson outlines his own conception of unity in metaphorical terms. Insisting on the inseparability of spiritual and physical matter, he posits that "the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the trees puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old" (*Nature* 64). Spirit, for Emerson, thus constitutes the lifeblood of physicality. Not simply a carbon-copy of God, corporeal and spiritual existence are inextricably interwoven, each representing a necessary part in the whole of the universe.

Likewise, Spinoza understands both thought and extension as necessary attributes of God. In the second section of his *Ethics*, in fact, Spinoza emphatically asserts that "God is a thinking thing" and "God is an extended thing" (64). In associating God with both the spirit or intellect and extension, Spinoza expressly disapproves of idealistic dualism. Acrimoniously belittling those who "deny that God is corporeal," Spinoza says, "they try to prove their point [by showing] clearly that in their thinking corporeal or extended substance is set completely apart

from the divine nature, and they assert that it is created by God. But they have no idea from what divine power it could have been created, which clearly shows that they don't know what they are saying" (40). Here Spinoza draws on the philosophic problem of interaction between physical and nonphysical substances: "Things which have nothing in common with each other cannot be understood through each other . . . conception of the one does not involve the conception of the other" (32). God, as the imminent cause of all things, must, according to Spinoza, share commonalities with everything caused; moreover, as substance, God represents everything in itself. Separating God from corporeality, according to Spinoza, precludes the possibility of recognizing God as a physically causal force. In his essay "The Over-Soul," Emerson conveys the same concept. Insisting on God's oneness with the universe, Emerson says, "as there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul, where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins" (*Collected Works* II 161).[16] Like Spinoza, Emerson rejects any fundamental break between God and humanity or, indeed, between physicality and spiritual substance.

The unity informing Emerson's thought bears striking resemblance to Spinoza's conception of the universe. For both thinkers, God is the universe as a whole and, as such, also supplies the primary mechanism for understanding the unity between substance's many attributes. Defining God as "substance consisting of infinite attributes," Spinoza discourages any notion of disparity between what he terms the "attributes" of substance (*Ethics* 31). Since

[16] Not surprisingly, Emerson actually mentions Spinoza by name later in this very same essay, listing him as a great teacher who speaks "*from within*" (170): "The great distinction between teachers sacred or literary…between philosophers like Spinoza, Kant and Coleridge, and philosophers like Locke, Paley, Mackintosh and Stewart—between men of the world who are reckoned accomplished talkers, and here and there a fervent mystic, prophesying half insane under the infinitude of his thought—is that one class speak *from within*, or from experience, as parties and professors of the fact; and the other class *from without*, as spectators merely, or perhaps as acquainted with the fact on the evidence of third persons. It is of no use to preach to me from without" (170). Later in the paragraph, Emerson likens Spinoza to Jesus in his conveyance of truth. Emerson clearly sees Spinoza, along with Coleridge and Jesus, as a strong intellectual and spiritual role model.

thought and extension constitute two of God's infinite attributes, Spinoza maintains, they do not constitute separate substances (*Ethics* 67). Similarly, Emerson rejects any real separation between physical and spiritual substances. In fact, Emerson adheres to a theological model quite close to that of Spinoza, where God constitutes the totality of substance, which is conceived through itself: "As a spiritual truth needs no proof but is its own reason, so the Universe needs no outer cause but exists by its own perfection and the sum of it all is this, God is" (*JMN* V 163). Understood in light of his assertion that both corporeality and intellection hint at a substance more fundamental than either attribute ("Poetry and Imagination" *Complete Works* VIII 9), Emerson's understanding of God as the entirety of the universe echoes Spinoza's association of God and substance: "no substance can be or be conceived external to God. . . . Hence it follows quite clearly that God is one: that is . . . in the universe there is only one substance, and this is absolutely infinite" (*Ethics* 39-40). In ascribing to God the property of extension and associating the entirety of substance with God, Emerson's conception of unity reflects a worldview uncannily similar to Spinoza's.

XIII. "Blessed Be Nothing": Morality and Values

As a result of their cosmologies, both Spinoza and Emerson allude to fixed, absolute values, but they both also distinguish between an absolute or necessary goodness and more general, human notions of value or morality. Though both thinkers understand values and morals as relative to humanity, Emerson approaches his notion of ethics and values from a different perspective than does Spinoza. Spinoza, because of his causal understanding of the universe, rejects the possibility of an objective standard of goodness: "nothing belongs to the nature of anything except that which follows from the nature of its efficient cause . . . . As for the terms 'good' and 'bad,' they likewise indicate nothing positive in things considered in

themselves, and are nothing but modes of thinking, or notions which we form from comparing things with one another" (*Ethics* 154). The resultant ethical theory describes all moral virtues and vices in terms of human advantage: morally virtuous actions increase human advantage, while morally abhorrent ones curtail it. Despite this outwardly relativistic stance, however, Spinoza uses the concept of God, an absolute, as a frame of reference for relative values (169). Defining "good" and "bad" wholly in terms of people, Spinoza says, "I . . . mean by 'good' that which we certainly know to be the means of our approaching nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves, and by 'bad' that which we certainly know prevents us from reproducing the said model" (155). The paragon of humanity that Spinoza describes centers on the idea of "power of activity" (155). Though he considers values relative to human advantage, knowledge of God is necessarily advantageous and, therefore, virtuous: "the absolute virtue of the mind is to understand. But the highest thing the mind can understand is God . . . . Therefore the highest virtue of the mind is to understand or to know God" (169). While Spinoza indicates that knowledge of God constitutes the mind's highest virtue, this knowledge, from a human perspective, counts as good only insofar as it benefits humanity. Humans, then, do not consider knowledge of God as an end unto itself; rather, through reason they understand that "the mind's utmost advantage . . . is knowledge of God" (169). More than just ensuring the advantage of the individual, moreover, knowledge of God, says Spinoza, leads humans to act in the interests of their fellows (174). According to Spinoza, then, true knowledge of God constitutes a necessary virtue, but he couches the account of virtue's moral weight in terms of human advantage.

Describing the transience of all values, Emerson approaches ethics from a similar perspective. Though he clandestinely alludes to goodness in absolute terms—"Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All" (*Nature*, *Complete Works* I 24)—

Emerson postulates the fluidity of all human virtues and ethics with equal alacrity. In his essay "Circles," Emerson quite explicitly challenges the notion of an absolute human morality: "the manners and morals of mankind are all at the mercy of a new generalization" (*Collected Works* II 183). Elaborating on the relativity of values, he says that "[a] new culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits" (184). Moreover, like Spinoza, Emerson understands virtue as self-preserving and evil as self-destructive. Speaking of virtue, Emerson says, "Whilst a man seeks these ends he is strong by the whole strength of nature. In so far as he roves from these ends, he bereaves himself of power, of auxiliaries; his being shrinks out of all remote channels and he disuniversalizes and he individualizes himself—and becomes all the time less and less" ("Ethics" 42). Emerson's notion of goodness accords with Spinoza's: describing self-perpetuating virtue, Emerson claims that "[t]here is nothing in the world that does not correspond to properties in [man] . . . . If you embrace the cause . . . of mankind, all things will work with and for you" (42). He further describes benevolence as "absolute and real," asserting, "[s]o much benevolence as a man hath, so much life hath he" (42). On the other hand, Emerson classifies evil as "merely privative" and insists that "Pure badness . . . could not subsist. It is annihilation" (42). Through goodness and benevolence, then, individuals secure the welfare of themselves and all of humanity; however, evil begets only self-destruction. This conception parallels Spinoza's own notion of "*conatus*" or self-preservation as the "basis of virtue" (*Ethics* 165). Spinoza says that virtue "is the very conatus to preserve one's own being" (*Ethics* 165). He maintains that "happiness consists in man's being able to preserve his own being" and that everybody "endeavors to preserve his own being . . . from the laws of his own nature" (165). Crucially, though, Spinoza insists that the virtuous person "will love with greater constancy [the good he pursues for himself] if he sees others loving the same thing" (174-5). Spinoza, then, like

Emerson, posits a "good . . . common to all, and [that] all can enjoy" (175). Both philosophers, therefore, insist on a common good and, furthermore, claim that individuals' pursuit of this good benefits all of humanity.

XIV. Humanity

Though each thinker uses mankind as his point of reference for the qualification of values, Emerson and Spinoza approach humanity in radically different ways. Emerson, expressing a very optimistic view of humanity in his early writings, asserts that nature exists in order to serve people. Associating investigation of nature with self-reflection and reflection on God, moreover, Emerson unreservedly anthropomorphizes both God and nature. Spinoza, to the contrary, quite explicitly discourages any notion of ascribing to God or nature human characteristics.

Owing to their mutual conception of humanity as inseparable from God, both thinkers understand humans as having some access to God's intellect. Spinoza, however, adopts a more dispassionate view of humanity than that of Emerson. Asserting that "the human mind is part of the infinite intellect of God," Spinoza maintains that "when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying . . . that God . . . in so far as he is explicated through the nature of the human mind, that is, in so far as he constitutes the essence of the human mind—has this or that idea" (*Ethics* 70-1). Spinoza here maintains that God constitutes the human mind, but he rejects the idea that the human mind accurately reflects the nature of divine intellect. Considering the human mind a finite mode of the infinite attribute of thought, Spinoza insists that "the intellect and will that would constitute the essence of God would have to be vastly different from human intellect and will, and could have no point of agreement except the name" (45). While Spinoza acknowledges that humans have access to the mind of God, they have that

access, he says, only insofar as God constitutes the essence of the human mind. Since God's intellect encompasses so many more elements than does the intellect of any individual, however, Spinoza emphasizes the illogicality of basing any assumptions about the whole of God's infinite intellect on a single, finite mode.

Emerson, adopting a position contradictory to Spinoza's theory of mind, enthusiastically encourages understanding God and nature as reflective of the human intellect. In fact, in his lecture "The Powers of the Mind" (1858), Emerson expresses his disapproval of Spinoza's account of the human intellect.[17] The difference between their positions on the human mind stems from Spinoza's strict understanding of modes and attributes and from a concept in Emerson that Norman Miller calls the "'each and all' doctrine" (381). According to this, Emerson maintains that "the All is in each particle . . . entire Nature reappears in every leaf & moss" (*JMN* VII 186). In his *Nature*, Emerson expresses the idea even more blatantly: "Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world" (*Complete Works* I 43). Combining this concept with his veneration of humankind, Emerson posits that "Nature is so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all and in every particular" (ibid. 63). Stressing the association between God and nature and understanding nature as highly reflective of humanity, Emerson thus asserts that "man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite" (64). Emerson, therefore, understands the difference between human and divine intellect as determined solely by degree; hence, the human mind, according to Emerson, possesses all the same characteristics as the divine intellect on a small scale. Spinoza, on the other hand, emphasizes that human and divine intellect differ in kind: because the human intellect is a finite mode of the infinite attribute of thought, "it is in

something else and is conceived through something else"—namely, the attribute of thought (*Ethics* 31).

XV. Was Emerson a Spinozist?

Emerson drew from a plethora of sources. Multitudes of thinkers, poets, and authors influenced his thought and writing. Therefore, Emerson could not follow, to the letter, all of Spinoza's philosophy; sifting through Spinozist ideas and gleaning what he considered the truth itself, Emerson incorporated pieces and aspects of Spinoza's philosophy into his own thinking and writing. However, the central ideas of Spinoza's metaphysics, religious philosophy, and system of ethics absolutely show through in Emerson's work. Closely associating God with nature and considering the universe as an apparition of God's intellect, Emerson quite explicitly incorporates Spinoza's idea that "the truth and formal essence of things is what it is because it exists as such in the intellect of God as an object of thought. Therefore, God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived as constituting God's essence, is in actual fact the cause of things, in respect both of their essence and their existence" (*Ethics* 45). Not adhering to Spinoza's strict geometric method, though, Emerson rejects many principles crucial to Spinoza's own philosophy. Indeed, Emerson does not entertain the notion that infinite attributes, in the Spinozistic sense, exist; moreover, he does not construct a rigid ontological and conceptual hierarchy comparable to Spinoza's understanding of substance, modes, and attributes. However, Emerson adopts a similar model of God as the totality of existence and the indwelling cause of all things. His system of ethics, similar to Spinoza's, incorporates a principle of *conatus*, ensuring the perpetuation of good and the unsustainability of evil. Furthermore, Emerson breathed new life

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[17] In this lecture, Emerson says of Spinoza that he did not "make . . . a contribution to mental philosophy," and says further, in regard to Spinoza's account of the mind, "Taking to pieces is the trade of those who cannot construct" (*Later Lectures* 73).

into Spinoza's treatment of scripture. Advocating a historical understanding of the bible and calling for the creation of new inspirational works not subjugated by the greatness of antiquity, Emerson, like Spinoza, cautioned against understanding biblical texts as the dead word of God.

Spinoza's influence paints Emerson in a highly philosophical light. As most accounts to date have considered his more literary influences—Swedenborg, Coleridge, and Plato—Emerson's writings have counted primarily as contributions to the sphere of literature. However, reexamining the issue, in light of his latent Spinozism, of whether "Emerson [is] a man of letters, merely, who dabbled in philosophy, or . . . a philosopher who chose, as the mighty Plato himself had chosen, to reformulate the thoughts of his predecessors and give them an artistic rendering," makes it clear that the latter characterization applies (Gray 26). Reformulating Spinoza's ideas without the geometric method, Emerson reified abstract concepts in Spinoza's philosophy—substance, attribute, and mode—giving them concrete meaning in a nineteenth-century American setting, giving them metaphorical and more accessible rendering in terms of the Over-Soul, Nature and humanity. In Emerson's writing, such concepts as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* have meanings grounded in humanity; whereas in Spinoza, these concepts receive little practical treatment and remain quite abstract.

Secondary accounts of Emerson, until the latter half of the twentieth century, failed, for the most part, to treat Emerson as a serious influence on Western philosophy. Upon philosophical investigation of his work, however, scholars like Stanley Cavell have found his work highly influential on the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, John Dewey, and many others. Throughout his life, Emerson expressed a clear interest in Spinoza; he proximately exacted an in-depth and protracted debate centering on the Spinozist tendencies of New England Transcendentalism. And in an effort to protect him from calumnious critics such as Andrews

Norton, Emerson's contemporaries and the generation following his engaged in a concerted cover-up by shielding him from the bugbear of Spinozism. Whether or not Emerson actually read Spinoza directly is of little consequence. Having read Bayle, Jacobi, and Herder, Emerson became familiar with the ideas present in Spinoza. That Emerson considered Spinoza Plato's equal ranks him among Emerson's major influences.

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