

The Death of the Heavens: Crescas and Spinoza on the Uniformity of the World

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ENG Abstract: The paper examines the roles of Crescas and Spinoza in the transition from the medieval to the modern conception of the universe. Crescas is presented as an illustrative example of the tension between Aristotelianism and revealed religion and how the latter brings about the dissolution of the former, thus paving the way for the modern conception of the universe. It is then showed how this modern conception is embodied in Spinoza's thought, which radicalizes some of its defining traits. This radicalization undermines the traditional conception of the *Deus absconditus* and leads in Spinoza to the replacement of religion by philosophy as the true divine revelation.

Keywords: Hasdai Crescas; Baruch Spinoza; Infinity; Divine Essence; Created World.

ES La muerte de los cielos: Crescas y Spinoza sobre la uniformidad del mundo

ES Resumen: El artículo examina el papel de Crescas y Spinoza en la transición de la concepción medieval a la concepción moderna del universo. Crescas es presentado como ejemplo ilustrativo de la tensión entre aristotelismo y religión revelada y de cómo esta última provoca la disolución del aquel, allanando así el camino a la concepción moderna del universo. A continuación, se muestra cómo la concepción moderna se plasma en el pensamiento de Spinoza, el cual radicaliza algunos de sus rasgos definitorios. Esta radicalización socava la noción tradicional del *Deus absconditus* y conduce en Spinoza al remplazo de la religión por la filosofía como auténtica revelación divina.

Palabras clave: Hasdai Crescas; Baruch Spinoza; infinitud; esencia divina; mundo creado.

Summary: 1. Introduction: Ethical Cosmos and Abrahamic Excess. 2. Hasdai Crescas (c. 1340 – c. 1410): Reestablishing the Relatedness to God. 2.1. Against Aristotelian “Finitism”. 2.2. Infinite Spacetime and God's Presence in the Universe. 2.3. Concealment and Transparency of the Divine Essence. 2.4. A New Synthesis? 3. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677): Infinity as Self-Affirmation of Reason. 3.1. Moral Neutrality of Nature. 3.2. Uniformity of Nature and Centralization of Divine Power. 3.3. Epistemological Priority of Infinity. 4. Concluding Remarks: The Abrahamic Excess Overtaken. 5 Bibliography.

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1. Introduction: Ethical Cosmos and Abrahamic Excess

In his book *La sagesse du monde: Histoire de l'expérience humaine de l'univers*,¹ Rémi Brague coins the compelling phrase “death of the heavens” to

describe the transition from the standard vision of the cosmos during the Middle Ages to the modern conception of the universe. By way of introduction to the subject of this essay, I would like to outline in very broad strokes the main argument that Brague presents by means of this expression. These introductory

¹ R. Brague, *La sagesse du monde: Histoire de l'expérience humaine de l'univers*. Paris: Fayard, 1999.

considerations will provide the framework of my ensuing reflections on Crescas and Spinoza.²

Rémi Brague characterizes the standard view of the world during the Middle Ages as an “ethical cosmos”. Its defining features can be illuminated by way of comparison to a central tenet of our contemporary mindset. We take nowadays for granted that the “physical” and the “axiological” are completely heterogeneous domains and that the latter is in no way entrenched or founded in the former. The physical world is for us completely devoid of values and moral significance. According to Brague, this sharp divide between the physical and the moral was foreign to the medieval (and ancient) mindset. What we nowadays call “values”—thus conveying their subjective character³—had then its proper seat and source *in the things themselves*.⁴ Normativity was thus inscribed in the very structure of reality; “goodness” and “being”, “ought” and “is” were not kept apart.

This is not to say that there was no room for evil—in the sense of imperfection and wickedness—in this conception, but rather that its scope was well circumscribed. Indeed, the sphere of evil and imperfection was located in the *sublunar region*, characterized by its mutability, corruptibility and “vileness”, in stark contrast to the *supralunar or celestial region*, characterized by its immutability, incorruptibility, higher dignity and “nobility”. Add to this that the earth is an insignificant point in comparison to *the whole of the world*—which aside from that was of finite dimensions. In this respect, goodness clearly prevails over evil, insofar as it “comprehends” or “encloses” it. On the whole, the cosmos is good.⁵ This clear distinction of areas or regions endowed with ethical significance made the medieval cosmos a hierarchical system of variously ranked compartments. As such, the cosmos constituted a model of normativity, both for the individual and for the collectivity.⁶ Brague thus speaks of a *cosmological ethics and politics*: the values that govern the individual and society are inscribed in the very structure of the world.

Despite its seeming stability—confirmed by centuries of hegemony—, this model was not free of internal tensions. For, according to Brague, the medieval ethical cosmos is already a synthesis—or rather a “compromise”—between two preexisting models, which he calls respectively “Timaeus” and “Abraham”. In other words: ancient pagan philosophy and revealed religion. According to Brague, “Abraham” contains certain “subversive” aspects or elements that destabilized the synthesis and gradually lead to its dissolution, thus giving rise to the modern conception of the universe. Among these destabilizing aspects, he stresses the fact that—for “Abraham”—the world has been created *ex nihilo* by a transcendent deity that acts by free will and governs the universe *in its entirety*. How does this exactly affect the stability of the medieval ethical cosmos? Brague’s reasoning on this point—supported by abundant textual evidence—can be paraphrased as follows. As has been just observed, the celestial realm is in the ethical cosmos nobler than and superior to the sublunar region. With respect to the creator, however, *everything* is equally vile and despicable. Taken in its radicality, the very idea of creation devalues the created in relation to the creator and leads to a relativization of the axiological differences and hierarchical ranks within the cosmos. The divide between the supralunar and the sublunar becomes relative; the contents of the world are leveled and put at the same distance of the creator.⁷ The world, in other words, becomes more uniform and homogeneous. *Moreover*, God’s unlimited power enables him to create more than one world; in fact, nothing can prevent him from creating *infinite worlds*, as well as an infinite spatiotemporal universe containing all of them. Even if the plurality of worlds remains a mere conjecture, its mere conceivability has already disastrous implications for the “ethical” character of the medieval cosmos. For it entails the separation of “goodness” and “being”: being our world just a particular one among infinite others, its presumable excellencies and perfections cease to be absolute and become a matter of perspective. “Goodness” is the source of the world, not the world itself, which is thus reduced to a mere “fact”, intrinsically devoid of value.⁸

In these far-reaching implications of the “Abrahamic excess”—as Brague puts it—we can already recognize three defining traits of the view of the universe that will follow the collapse of the medieval ethical cosmos. *A) It is uniform*: it does not have qualitatively differentiated domains or “compartments” governed by different sets of laws (unlike the medieval cosmos). In the new universe, matter is everywhere the same and natural phenomena are subjected to the same set of laws and explanatory

² Unless otherwise indicated, all references of Spinoza are from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols., translated by Edwin Curley, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 2016. I have used the following usual abbreviations to refer to Spinoza’s writings: TIE, *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*]; Ep., *Letters*; TTP, *Theological Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*]; TP, *Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Politicus*]. When referring to the *Ethics*, I have used the following abbreviations: a=axiom, c=corollary, d=demonstration, p=proposition, s=scholium, app=appendix, l=lemma. Therefore, E1p10 refers to proposition 10 of part 1 of the *Ethics* and E2p40s2 to the scholium 2 of the proposition 40 of part 2.

³ Cf. R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁴ Cf. R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁵ R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 143: “Le monde, et avant tout ce qu’il y a de plus cosmique dans le monde, à savoir le ciel, donne à l’homme antique et médiéval l’éclatant témoignage de ce que le bien n’est pas seulement une possibilité, mais une triomphante réalité. La cosmologie a une dimension éthique. À son tour, la tâche de transporter un tel bien dans ce bas monde où nous vivons enrichit l’éthique d’une dimension cosmologique. C’est par la médiation du monde que l’homme devient ce qu’il doit être et, partant, ce qu’il est.”

⁶ R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 158: “L’éthique antique et médiévale contient donc une dimension selon laquelle la pratique morale doit prendre pour modèle la régularité du monde. Cette imitation ne vaut pas que pour l’individu. L’ordre cosmique est une norme pour la cité elle aussi.”

⁷ R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 185: “La dévalorisation du créé par rapport au Créateur mène à relativiser les différences de valeur à l’intérieur de celui-ci. Les êtres les plus nobles sont donc vils par rapport à Dieu.”

⁸ R. Brague, *La sagesse*, *op. cit.*, p. 210: “La pluralité des mondes, même si elle reste de pure hypothèse, a une conséquence ontologique. Le réel est réduit à n’être rien de plus que le factuel. L’être et le bien sont de la sorte dissociés: l’être de ce monde réel qui est le nôtre a sa source dans un bien qui ne coïncide pas avec lui, mais lui est extérieur, à savoir la bienveillance de Dieu qui l’a choisi parmi d’autres possibles.”

principles. *B) It is morally neutral*: it does not feature any hierarchies or differences of rank, no privileged or superior regions that would constitute models of behavior or sources of normativity, individually as well as socially. Categories such as “good” or “bad”, “merit” and “sin” are alien to the physical universe, which only contains facts devoid of axiological significance. *C) It is infinite*: it has no boundaries or limits; hence, no absolute points of reference, such as center, periphery, and the like. In this respect, it reflects the limitlessness of the creator. Given these traits, it is not surprising that Bregue talks about the “the death of the heavens” with respect to this new conception: the celestial regions lose in this new outlook their preeminence and exemplary character.

It is against this backdrop that I would like to present the following reflections on Crescas and Spinoza. Admittedly, both thinkers have played a crucial role in the process of disintegration of the medieval ethical cosmos and in the emergence of the new conception of the universe.⁹ However, each of them epitomizes a different phase of the process: whereas Crescas exemplifies the tension and inadequacy between “Timaeus” and “Abraham”, Spinoza represents the definitive end of this synthesis and its replacement by an infinite, homogeneous and morally neutral universe. In what follows, I will spell out in more detail their respective role in the death of the heavens. In particular, I will argue that:

1. For Crescas, the tension between “Timaeus” and “Abraham” takes the form of an inadequacy between Aristotelianism (in its Maimonidean reading) and Judaism. Crescas perceives the main shortcoming of Aristotelianism in its “finitism”, which entails a notion of the divine as an *otherness* unrelated to the world utterly incompatible with the God of the Torah. Crescas thus carries out a remodeling of the philosophical discourse in order to make it more conform with the revealed message. The central notion in this remodeling is that of infinity, which is alien to the “Timaeic” model.

2. Regarding Spinoza, the aforementioned defining features of the modern conception of the universe are fully present in his thought. Yet his particularly radical interpretation of these features leads him to subvert the traditional unknowability of the divine—thus bringing further some of Crescas’ fecund insights—and to lay the foundations for a critical examination of religion, since the latter can no longer claim the monopoly of revelation.

2. Hasdai Crescas (1340 – 1410): Reestablishing the Relatedness to God

2.1. Against Aristotelian “Finitism”

The thought of Hasdai Crescas exemplifies the explicit awareness of the aforementioned tension between “Abraham” and “Timaeus”. In his major work, *Or Hashem*, Crescas sets out to subject the main philosophical tenets of Maimonidean Aristotelianism

to a careful scrutiny. The main motivation behind this critical undertaking is of theological and religious nature¹⁰. In particular, Crescas is extremely wary of Maimonides’ attempt to underpin the doctrines of Judaism by means of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics—i.e., by means of “Timaeus”. In Crescas’ view, the authority of Aristotle has been revered beyond measure to the detriment of tradition and revelation, which alone can teach us the truth and “open our eyes”.¹¹ However, Crescas’ approach should be clearly distinguished from religious anti-philosophical positions such as Yehuda Halevi’s and al-Ghazali’s.¹² His wariness is not towards philosophy *as such*, but rather towards Aristotelianism (in its Maimonidean version). In this respect, his project is not merely destructive, but contains fecund philosophical insights that depart from the prevalent Aristotelianism at the time and—as Wolfson put it—“foreshadow a new conception of the universe”¹³. These contributions include, among others: the possibility of actual infinity and of a vacuum, elimination of the break between the sublunar and the translunar region, affirmation of a plurality of worlds, etc. Although many of these innovative insights in *Or Hashem* remain inchoate and do not amount to a full-fledged theory, their presence is unmistakable.

Of special philosophical import is Crescas’ sharp critique of Aristotle’s rejection of infinity. In his classic book on Crescas’ critique of Aristotle, Wolfson observes that Crescas’ great merit is to have perceived that Aristotle’s rejects infinity by arguing “from the analogy of a finite”.¹⁴ Differently put: the *finite* constitutes for Aristotle the standard or measuring stick of being and knowability, and in this respect his philosophy can be fittingly described as “finitist”. Yet the rules that apply to the finite do not apply to infinity.¹⁵ In this respect, Aristotle’s approach is unsuited to adequately grasp the infinite *from the very outset*.

Yet why should Aristotle’s finitism pose a danger to the doctrines of traditional Judaism? In which sense could a conceptualization of the revealed message in Aristotelian—i.e., “finitist”—terms possibly misrepresent its content? I advance the following hypothesis, which will find its confirmation in the exam of Crescas’

⁹ As Lasker observes, Crescas’ thought “won few adherents among his contemporaries and successors in the late Middle Ages”; nonetheless, “the result of Crescas’ argumentation was a philosophical system which could compete with Aristotelianism on its own terms” (D. Lasker, “Chasdai Crescas”, in Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Jewish Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 336).

¹⁰ Cf. J. T. Robinson, “Hasdai Crescas and anti-Aristotelianism”, in Daniel H. Frank and O. Leaman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 391.

¹¹ For instance, regarding God’s unity, which according to Crescas cannot be sufficiently proven by philosophical speculation alone (see H. Crescas, *Light of the Lord [Or Hashem]*. Trans. R. Weiss. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 114). As for the illuminating power of revelation in opposition to Aristotle, see H. Crescas, *Or Hashem, op. cit.*, p. 24 (italics mine): “And since the source of error and confusion is reliance on the words of the Greek and the proofs he produced, it struck me as appropriate to highlight the fallaciousness of his proofs and the sophistry of his arguments—even those the Rabbi borrowed from him to bolster his own positions—in order, on this day, to show all the nations that *which removes confusion in matters of faith, and which lights up all the darkness, is the Torah alone [...]*”

¹² Cf. G. Vajda, *Introduction à la pensée juive du Moyen Âge*. Paris: Vrin, 1947, p. 170.

¹³ Cf. H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas’ Critique of Aristotle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929, p. 114.

¹⁴ H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas’ Critique of Aristotle, op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ See N. Rabinovitch, “Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410) on Numerical Infinities”, *Isis*, 61 (1970), pp. 224-230.

doctrine that I offer below. The emphasis put on the finite as the yardstick of both being and knowability inevitably relegates the infinite (and hence God) either to non-being¹⁶ or to transcendence. In both cases, infinity becomes an *otherness* external to discourse and unrelated to the world of finite beings. This is where the inadequacy between “Timaeus” and “Abraham”—as articulated by Crescas—becomes apparent. The result of this banishment of the infinite out the world is a completely *alienated God*, which—in contrast to the God of the Bible—cannot possibly entertain any relation with creatures.¹⁷ The main problem with Aristotle’s finitism, when one tries to merge it with the revealed message (as Maimonides does), is that it *evacuates* and *estranges* God from the created world, hindering any possible relationship between them, as Judaism demands. Aristotelianism—i.e., “Timaeus”—thus obstructs the connectedness with God that constitutes the central message of the Torah. In this respect, we could say, Crescas’ critique of Aristotle aims at reestablishing the connectedness with the divine.¹⁸ In order to achieve this purpose, it is necessary to dismantle the whole conceptual framework that causes this alienation of the divine, namely Aristotle’s “finitist” metaphysics and physics. This explains how Crescas’ main theological worries—which at first sight are far away from physical concerns—can result in a complete reorganization of the standard cosmological and physical outlook during the Middle Ages.

Yet how far can such a dismantling and restructuring go in the 14th and 15th centuries, when Aristotelianism is still prevalent? The impossibility of carrying out a complete *tabula rasa* of Aristotelianism—and, by extension, of the *hochmá yevanit*—is the cause of numerous hesitations and uncertainties in Crescas’ work, as I will show in what follows.

2.2. Infinite Spacetime and God’s Presence in the Universe

Crescas presents an impressive array of arguments against Aristotelian “finitist” physics that undermine its very foundations. To examine these arguments in detail would go beyond the scope of this essay, so I will limit myself to the following observation: in the main, and as already observed, Crescas accuses Aristotle of arguing “from the analogy of the finite”,

thus hindering any possible grasp of infinity *as such*. In his approach to the notion of place, for instance, Aristotle takes particular bodies as the basis point of reference; place is thus defined as the “adjacent surface of the containing body”,¹⁹ making spatiality relative and depending on the body that occupies it. The same approach can be discerned in Aristotle’s treatment of time, which he characterizes as “the number of motion (or of rest) of a physical object (particularly the diurnal sphere)”²⁰. Crescas strategy on this issue chiefly consists in questioning this priority of the finite and in conceiving both space (*makom*) and time (*zman*) independently of physical bodies. He so-to-speak “emancipates” space and time from the primacy of the finite, turning space into an infinite vacuum and time into an infinite duration.²¹ The result of this “liberation” is an infinitely extended and perpetual universe devoid of physical bodies, yet susceptible of containing them.

In this infinite space-time continuum, an infinite number of worlds can be conceived, although Crescas nowhere asserts it peremptorily.²² In any event, by affirming that matter in this infinite continuum is everywhere the same, Crescas abrogates the divide between the translunar and the sublunar region and eliminates the differences of rank within the cosmos. The distinction between corruptible and incorruptible regions loses its meaning, and thus the possibility, not just of creation of the world at a particular moment of time, but of continuous creation at all instants of time (*ha-hiddush ha-temidi*) becomes admissible.²³ In support of this view, Crescas appeals to tradition quoting the rabbinic dictum: “He would construct worlds and destroy them.”²⁴ For Crescas, these conclusions bear witness to the radical infirmity and ontological dependence of all things with respect to God, who produces them out of absolute nonexistence.²⁵ Whether the world has been created at a certain time or always existed makes no difference: by contrast to the self-subsistent (yet still divinely governed) world conceived by Aristotle, for Crescas all beings originate *entirely* from God. This feature of radical dependence of the created with respect to the creator will become more salient in the 17th century, especially in Spinoza’s thought, as I will show below.

It is apparent that such an infinite universe reflects or manifests God’s unlimited power and glory more adequately than the limited ethical cosmos. Although it might sound paradoxical, the infinite distance of God with respect to all created beings—which, as repeatedly observed, relativizes the differences of rank within the cosmos—results here in a certain

¹⁶ Thus, Aristotle identifies infinity with matter and matter with privation; see *Physics*, III, 7, 208a. On the equation between matter, infinity, and non-being, see also Plotinus, *Enneads*, II, IV, 15.

¹⁷ See for instance Lasker’s description of Maimonides’ theory of negative attributes, which Crescas also attacks (D. Lasker, “Chasdai Crescas”, *op. cit.*, p. 341; italics mine): “The result of this theory is a totally transcendent God, *one who cannot be said to have a relationship to this world*.” Similar complaints against Aristotle’s “finitism” will be later forcefully presented by Giordano Bruno; see M. Á. Granada, *Filosofía y religión en el Renacimiento*, Sevilla: Thémata, 2021, p. 349.

¹⁸ Cf. D. Lasker, “Chasdai Crescas”, *op. cit.*, p. 342 (italics mine): “If there is one common thread in Crescas’ discussion of these corner-stones of Judaism, it is a rejection of the Aristotelian ‘intellectualist’ view of the relation between God and humanity [...] Crescas rejected this intellectualist approach to God’s relation to the world, *replacing it with the concept that God acts toward the world through his goodness, love, and grace*.”

¹⁹ M. Jammer, *Concepts of Space. The History of Theories of Space in Physics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 74.

²⁰ W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas*. Amsterdam: J. G. Gieben, 1998, p. 7.

²¹ Cf. W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²² Regarding the issue of plural worlds and the presumable connection between Crescas and scholastic philosophy, see S. Feldman, “On Plural Universes: A Debate in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and the Duhem-Pines Thesis”, *Aleph*, 12 (2012), pp. 329-366.

²³ Cf. H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 276. Cf. W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²⁴ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

²⁵ Cf. H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

closeness or immediacy of God towards all things. Once all hierarchies have been eliminated, no region or type of being can be considered to be closer or more related to the divine than the others. Verticality is thus replaced by horizontality, and all things are equally contingent upon God's boundless benefaction. It is thus not surprising that Crescas speaks of God-taking up again a rabbinic dictum—as “the place of the world”. Let us leave undecided whether this statement should be taken literally or metaphorically, “whether this infinite space-continuum is created by, emanates from, or is an attribute of God”²⁶. The important aspect to be stressed is that the infinite space-time continuum conceived by Crescas, insofar as it *tightens* the relationship between the creator and the created, serves Crescas' overarching purpose of reestablishing the connectedness with the divine that Aristotelian “finitism” had hindered.

2.3. Concealment and Transparency of the Divine Essence

A similar drive towards a notion of the divine that stresses its orientation towards creatures can be discerned in Crescas' conception of divine attributes, despite the difficulties and seeming inconsistencies that this conception is fraught with.²⁷ Seemingly in line with Maimonides' approach to this issue, Crescas stresses in numerous passages that the divine essence is “absolutely inscrutable” (*neelam takhlit healem*)²⁸ and “that the quiddity of God is at the highest degree of concealment (*betakhlit hahelem*), such that apprehension of His essential attributes was impossible even for the master of the prophets”²⁹. Maimonides had famously insisted upon the absolute unknowability of God's quiddity and denied the possibility of essential attributes, on the ground that their plurality would impinge upon God's simplicity.³⁰ From God's unknowability Maimonides inferred the absolute *unrelatedness* between God and creatures, and one might expect that Crescas draws a similar conclusion. Yet, in apparent contradiction with his own statements, Crescas affirms that “there is no avoiding affirming essential attributes of God”³¹ and that relatedness between God and creatures should be admitted. Crescas seems thus to be committed—quite problematically at first glance—to both the

impenetrability and the transparency of the divine essence.

Two divergent tendencies are recognizable in Crescas' approach to this difficult issue. In conformity with God's unknowability, Crescas argues that essential attributes, although essentially connected with God's innermost essence, *are nonetheless different from it*. Using a famous simile from the *Sefer Yetzirah*, Crescas compares the relationship between God's quiddity and essential attributes with a flame “connected to a live coal”.³² With this—rather unsatisfactory—solution, Crescas avoids the danger of attributive plurality colliding with God's simplicity. This explanation aligns him with the traditional approach as well as with the “finitism” endorsed by Maimonides.³³ Vajda has powerfully described the resulting scheme of things as follows: “behind the knowable essential attributes lies the indeterminate and absolutely hidden essence.”³⁴ The divine essence thus remains an *otherness* without relation to the world and human knowledge.

Yet Crescas presents another explanation of different character, which unfortunately he does not entirely spell out: “[...] although from our perspective attributes are separate, they are one from God's. And the infinite goodness that is His essentially includes them all and renders them divine on all counts.”³⁵ In this explanation, God's quiddity is no longer an otherness beyond all determination, but rather the *unifying principle* of a multiplicity of aspects and properties, which therefore do not constitute a *composite*, but an indissoluble unity, in which one aspect cannot be conceived independently of the others.³⁶ As Vajda observes, divine simplicity remains in this solution “intact”.³⁷ We can easily see the difference between the two examined solutions. Whereas the “traditional” one tends to *alienate* the divine essence from the world, conceiving it as something *extraneous* to diversity and plurality, the other, more “innovative” one conceives God as the underlying oneness of plurality. In one solution, God is, so-to-speak, one half of a split-up reality; in the other, God is an all-encompassing unity.

This thrust towards a more unified worldview, in which God ceases to be one half of a split-up reality, reappears in one of the most innovative aspects of Crescas' thought: his conception of divine love and benefaction. We have here—as Zeev Harvey has pointed out—a positive contribution of Crescas' philosophy, not reducible to his critique of Aristotle. Harvey has shown that Crescas' conception of love departs from the philosophical tradition—and ultimately from Plato and Aristotle—in that it attributes to God a loving

²⁶ J. T. Robinson, “Hasdai Crescas and anti-Aristotelianism”, *op. cit.*, p. 404. This is a controversial issue. See C. Fraenkel, “Hasdai Crescas on God as the Place of the World and Spinoza's Notion of God as ‘res extensa’”, *Aleph*, 9 (2009), pp. 77-111.

²⁷ See H. A. Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem of Divine Attributes”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 7 (1916), pp. 1-44, pp. 75-121; W. Z. Harvey, “Bewilderments in Crescas's Theory of Attributes”, *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 8 (1997), pp. 133-144 (Hebrew). Regarding the parallels between Crescas' and Spinoza's respective conceptions of divine attributes, see Y. Melamed, “Hasdai Crescas and Spinoza on Actual Infinity and the Infinity of God's Attributes”, in Steven Nadler (ed.), *Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 204-215.

²⁸ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁹ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³⁰ Cf. D. Lasker, “Chasdai Crescas”, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

³¹ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 110. Essential divine attributes had already been admitted by Averroes and Gersonides, as part of their return to Aristotle. Cf. H. A. Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem”, *op. cit.*

³² H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³³ Wolfson talks about the weight of tradition finally taking over Crescas (Cf. H. A. Wolfson, “Crescas on the Problem”, *op. cit.*)

³⁴ G. Vajda, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 175: “derrière les attributs d'essence connaissables se trouve l'essence indéterminée et absolument cachée.”

³⁵ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

³⁶ Cf. G. Vajda, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 174. Shlomo Pines has shown the striking parallels between this conception of divine attributes—as encompassed by God's goodness—and the one articulated by Duns Scotus. See S. Pines, “Scholasticism after Thomas Aquinas and the Teachings of Hasdai Crescas and His Predecessors”, *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 1 (1967), 39 [527].

³⁷ Cf. G. Vajda, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*

impulse towards creatures. This loving impulse should not be understood in the sense of longing and privation—which would be unworthy of the divine nature—, but in the sense of *power and spontaneity*.³⁸ According to Crescas, God's loving impulse "causes His goodness and perfection to overflow" over creatures, thus sustaining "their existence by the constant overflowing of His goodness".³⁹ Recall that goodness is for Crescas the unifying principle of divine attributes. In the context we are now examining, goodness—through the mediation of love—is also the unifying principle and sustainer of all existents, a sort of *nexus universalis* that connects and links together the infinite plurality of creatures.⁴⁰ Therefore, that which accounts for God's unity, accounts also for the world's unity, as well as for the unity between God and the world!

Despite the inchoate character of these insights, they all point in the same direction, namely: towards a conception of the divine nature as that which is truly *universal, general, and common to everything*, as opposed to a more traditional conception of the divine as a transcendent *otherness* unrelated to the world. It is clear that, while the traditional conception relatively fits with Aristotelian "finitism"—insofar as it places God *outside of* the finite world—, the novel conception that Crescas is advancing requires its outright dismantling.

2.4. A New Synthesis?

Returning to Brague's terminology discussed in the introduction, we can say that Crescas' *Or Hashem* stages "Abraham"'s judgment of "Timaeus", a judgment that entails the repudiation of central philosophical tenets, not only of Aristotelianism, but of philosophy up to that point. Yet, as already observed, Crescas' demolition work is not merely destructive and anti-philosophical, but yields positive results, "viable alternatives"⁴¹ to the Aristotelianism of his time. Crescas does not exclusively lean on tradition to attack Aristotelianism: "Tradition, according to him, is a guide only in matters theological; he does not employ it in deciding problems concerning the nature of things."⁴² We can therefore safely say that Crescas offers a new "theological-philosophical synthesis",⁴³ but this synthesis can no longer be described as the (unstable) marriage between "Timaeus" and "Abraham", insofar as it operates with notions and concepts that were foreign to Greek philosophical thought. Let us briefly examine some of the features of this new synthesis.

In this new synthesis, religious truth does no longer need the support of philosophical speculation, as it happens in Maimonides.⁴⁴ What Crescas

rather seeks is the conformity and agreement between the two, without one relying on the other.⁴⁵ This audacious attempt to emancipate religion from the yoke of philosophy has led some commentators to speak of "anti-intellectualism" and "anti-rationalism" in Crescas. Yet what exactly should be understood under "rationalism" here? As my argument has tried to show, the dismantlement of Aristotelian "finitism" that Crescas carries out seeks to make philosophy more conform to the revealed message *by bringing the divine nature closer to the world and the human mind* (and conversely: by bringing the world and the human mind closer to the divine nature). Take for instance his critique of Aristotle's rejection of infinity: infinity is now *conceivable*, which means that it is no longer *alien* to human reason. Also recall the problem of divine attributes: although essentially concealed and impenetrable, divine quiddity is for Crescas susceptible of essential attributions and admits of a considerable degree of connectedness with created beings, etc. In sum: Crescas' reform of the prevailing philosophical framework seeks to expand its scope in order to better capture the richness and depth of the revealed message, and, in this respect, the talk of "anti-intellectualism" is misguided. Although this is not present in Crescas yet, the foundations are being laid for an immanentization of the divine and for its integration into human reason. And this shift—although foreign, even opposite, to Crescas' intent—entails a potential replacement of religion by philosophy, as I will show below with respect to Spinoza.

There can be of course no real transformation of a prevailing philosophical discourse without a general destabilization. The careful reader of *Or Hashem* might get often the impression that the *pars destruens* of Crescas' project outweighs the *pars construens*, which explains the use of labels such as "scepticism" and even "fideism" by some commentators to characterize his endeavor. This impression admits to characterization compatible with the reading I have presented so far: if the target of a thoroughgoing critique—such as Crescas'—are the pillars of an all-embracing system with no significant rivals back then—such as Aristotelianism—, then the results of such a critique necessarily entail a certain distrust of reason and the power of philosophical speculation, *at least in the terms of the philosophical system under attack*.

3. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677): Infinity as Self-Affirmation of Reason

A bit more than two centuries separate Crescas' theological-philosophical synthesis and Spinoza's rationalistic monism. The context has significantly changed: by the time of Spinoza, the medieval ethical cosmos, without having completely disappeared, is in its terminal phase.⁴⁶ The philosophical dis-

³⁸ Cf. W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³⁹ H. Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁴⁰ Love is thus for Crescas—to use Hume's words— "the cement of the world". As Harvey notes (W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 113), if Crescas had elaborated more these insights about love, translating them "into scientific propositions [...] he might have stumbled upon a theory of gravitation three centuries before Newton."

⁴¹ Hasdai Crescas, *Or Hashem*, *op. cit.*, text from the back cover.

⁴² H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴³ G. Vajda, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

⁴⁴ Cf. H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, p. 124; cf. J. A. Fernández López, *Estudios de pensamiento medie-*

val hispanojudío, Madrid: Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, 2022, pp. 127-132.

⁴⁵ W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p. 65: "Truth, in other words, is coherent. The truth of science cannot contradict that of prophecy, but science and prophecy will inevitably bear witness to each other. Science cannot confirm religion, but also cannot disconfirm it. It agrees with religion, and even gives us an *inclination* toward its truths."

⁴⁶ A difference should be made between the beginning of the 17th century and the end; between the Galileo affair and the publication of Newton's *Principia*, the opposition to the new

course in which this worldview was cloaked persists but is largely discredited. At the same time, a new conception of the universe—the one “foreshadowed” by Crescas—emerges with force and towards the end of the 17th century becomes the standard one. This conception is closely linked to a new ideal of knowledge, as the ensuing reflections will show.⁴⁷ Some of the defining features of this new conception of the universe have been pointed out in the introduction: moral neutrality, homogeneity and infinity. These features can be found in Spinoza, as well as in those of his contemporaries that advocate new science. Yet, whereas most of Spinoza’s contemporaries search for a compromise between these themes and old ones, Spinoza adopts them in an especially *uncompromising* way. Spinoza’s unyielding approach to these questions upsets the traditional understanding of the relationship between God and the created world and causes a shift of the “locus of truth” from revelation to philosophy,⁴⁸ as I am about to show.

3.1. Moral Neutrality of Nature

The divorce between values and nature that characterizes the new conception of the universe is particularly blatant in Spinoza. He repeatedly stresses that notions such as good and bad, perfect and imperfect and the like are mere *modi cogitandi* and should not be uncritically projected unto nature itself.⁴⁹ As is well known, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities becomes customary during the 17th century. We can say that Spinoza extends this distinction—initially restricted to sensory perception—to concepts of value as well.⁵⁰ Merit and sin, beauty and ugliness, order and confusion, they all are as subjective and mind-dependent as color, flavor and taste. This explains Spinoza’s vehement rejection of teleology and final causation, which is for him the prejudice at the root of all others. The philosophical doctrine of final causation springs from our persistent tendency to misconstrue the universe as attuned and conformed to our particularity and point of view. Teleology and ethical conceptions of the universe—such as the medieval ethical cosmos—are both cases of philosophically uninstructed anthropocentrism.

Despite his reputation as a dogmatic thinker, Spinoza has a keen awareness of the relativity of our subjective viewpoint and of the way our “situatedness” within the world prevents us from acquiring knowledge of things as *they are in themselves*.⁵¹ Our

subjective view of things, the particular angle from which we perceive nature in accordance with our unstable and changeable state, is the main obstacle to genuine, impartial and unbiased cognition, insofar as it presents reality fragmentarily and in a “mutilated” manner, as “conclusions without premises” (E2p28d). This is actually the reason why Spinoza equates sense perception with imagination: insofar as the former unavoidably distorts reality and shows it *in relation to us* (not as it is in itself), it is as “fictitious” and “unreal” as the latter. This circumstance does not condemn us to sheer ignorance—there is in fact in Spinoza an unusual confidence in the scope of our cognitive powers, as I will show below. It also does not entail the rejection of sense perception and experience altogether.⁵² Yet the awareness of our particularity prohibits us from accepting sense perception *at face value* and making it the point of departure of our understanding of the world, as the vulgar and school philosophy purport. From mutilated perceptions only a mutilated worldview can result, and a conception of the universe that features irreducible breaks and bifurcations is ultimately unamenable to full intelligibility.⁵³ Now, this is according to Spinoza what philosophers have done until now, especially in their attempt to understand the relationship between God and the world: they have erected artificial superstructures based on incomplete and fragmentary perceptions rendering knowledge of the divine unattainable.⁵⁴

The medieval ethical cosmos can be seen as a good example—from Spinoza’s perspective—of a worldview constructed on these false premises.⁵⁵ The discontinuities and breaks that this conception features—for instance, in the divide between supralunar and sublunar world⁵⁶—are an unavoidable consequence of the discontinuity and fragmentary character of the observations upon which this conception is founded. The same can be said regarding the limitedness of the world in this conception! Just as our sense perception is finite and does not extend beyond certain limits, a conception of the universe based on it must necessarily be finite as well. Finally,

conception of the universe has significantly waned. Moreover, the durability of the medieval ethical cosmos up to that point is also due to the versatility and capacity of scholastic thought to integrate innovations. Cf. E. Grant, *Much Ado about Nothing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

⁴⁷ Cf. A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*. Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 290-346.

⁴⁸ R. H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979, 229: “Obviously Spinoza changed the locus of truth from religion to rational knowledge in mathematics and metaphysics. To accomplish this he had to start with a most critical analysis of the claims for revealed religious knowledge”.

⁴⁹ Cf. TIE § 12 (GII/8), Letter 32 (IV/170a).

⁵⁰ Cf. L. Robinson, *Kommentar zu Spinozas Ethik*. Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1928, p. 237.

⁵¹ Regarding Spinoza’s nuanced stance towards skepticism and our cognitive impotence in general, see J. M. Sánchez

de León Serrano, “The Place of Skepticism in Spinoza’s Thought”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 35:1 (2018), pp. 1-19; also “Spinoza on Global Doubt”, in G. Veltri, R. Haliva, S. Schmid and E. Spinelli (eds.), *Skeptical Paths Enquiry and Doubt from Antiquity to the Present*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019, pp. 147-164.

⁵² Regarding the indispensable role of experience in Spinoza’s seemingly anti-empiricist stance, see M. Walther, *Metaphysik als Anti-Theologie: Die Philosophie Spinozas im Zusammenhang der religionsphilosophischen Problematik*, Felix Meiner Verlag: Hamburg, 1971, pp. 59-76.

⁵³ Cf. M. Della Rocca, “Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Scepticism”, *Mind*, 464 (2007), p. 853.

⁵⁴ See especially E2p10s.

⁵⁵ What I am presenting here is a hypothetical critique that Spinoza, based on his views on imagination and sense perception, could address to the medieval ethical cosmos; I am therefore *not* reproducing here an argument explicitly set forth by him.

⁵⁶ H. A. Wolfson, *Crescas’ Critique of Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, p. 118: “In Aristotle’s conception of the universe, despite his assumption of an interconnection between the various parts of the universe and a continuity of motion running throughout its parts, there was still a certain break and discontinuity and heterogeneity in nature. This break occurs at the juncture of the translunar and the sublunar parts of the universe, and as a result of it nature becomes divided into two distinct realms.”

the moral and axiological significance that this conception assigns to the regions of the cosmos would be a consequence of the aforementioned human tendency to project subjective *modi cogitandi* onto things themselves.

3.2. Uniformity of Nature and Centralization of Divine Power

In line with the modern conception of the universe, Spinoza conceives nature as a homogeneous realm without compartments or dominions governed by different sets of laws:⁵⁷ “[...] for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same” (E3, *Preface*). Instead of locating change and immutability in different areas of the world—as it happened in the medieval ethical cosmos—, this new conception grasps immutability and lawfulness in change itself, as the overarching legality that governs it.⁵⁸

Yet this modern trait takes on in Spinoza—as the previous one—more radical overtones than among his contemporaries. The jurisdiction of nature extends in Spinoza over all things *without exception*. Thus, human affects should be studied as any other natural phenomenon, such as heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc.,⁵⁹ for the position of the human mind within nature is not to be conceived as “a dominion within a dominion” (*imperium in imperio*; E3, *Preface*). Moreover, if we happen to observe any breach of the lawfulness of nature, or a phenomenon that we cannot explain through the laws of nature *known by us*, we should not attribute it to a supernatural power exceeding the power of nature, but to our limited knowledge, for we cannot “determine how far its force and power [of nature] extend, and what surpasses its force” (Ep. 75, G IV/315a). There is no such thing as miracles, except *in relation to us*.⁶⁰ To interpret these breaches of natural legality as proof of a supernatural power, to which the power of nature would be subservient, is for Spinoza to explain something mysterious by means of something even more mysterious (cf. Ep. 75). The very notion of miracle involves the existence of “two powers numerically distinct from one another” (TTP, VI, G III/81), and this is precisely the

kind of discontinuous and heterogenous worldview that our mutilated perception of reality—when taken at face value—engenders. Spinoza thus endorses a strict naturalism.

With this absolutization of nature’s power, Spinoza might seem to return to nature the prerogatives that modern science—according to certain readings⁶¹—had denied to it. In fact, the very opposite is the case. Although Spinoza is not a scientist, he wholeheartedly partakes of the *ethos* of the new science. This means—among other things—that he also emphatically rejects the view of created beings as endowed with autonomous powers different from God’s, as if created nature were a sort of delegate or viceregent of God. The conception of nature as completely devoid of wisdom and activity *of its own*—and hence *entirely* subordinated to God’s power—is precisely what lies behind mechanical philosophy. In this respect, and as Robert Boyle forcefully argues in his *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, mechanical philosophy is more in line with piety and religion than the scholastic-Aristotelian approach to nature, which borders on overt paganism.⁶² The modern conception of nature thus carries out—as Lorraine Daston rightly puts it—a “centralization of divine power”.⁶³ Spinoza endorses this view, even taking it much further than his contemporaries, insofar as he denies to created beings, not just efficacy of their own (as Malebranche and modern occasionalism do), but also *being of their own*. God is for Spinoza, not just the source of things, *but their very substance*, so that they cannot nor be conceived without God (E1p14-15). By equating God with nature and declaring it the only existing substance, Spinoza is not divinizing the natural world, but radically *de-substantializing* finite beings. We can recognize here the radical infirmity and dependence of the created with respect to the creator that Crescas had already conceptualized (with his idea of constant creation and destruction of worlds) but taken to its maximum degree.

Now, from Spinoza’s perspective, the reason why traditional philosophy has *substantialized* the finite is the same reason why it has conceived the universe as a discontinuous and heterogeneous assemblage, to wit: it has taken mutilated sense perception, our *images of things*, as the measuring stick of “thingness” and “substantiality”, without taking into account the relativity of our partial viewpoint. Traditional philosophy thus has—according to Spinoza—not only substantialized particulars, but also reified universals,⁶⁴ hypostatized all sorts of abstractions and beings of reason⁶⁵ and objectified the figments of

⁵⁷ Cf. M. Della Rocca, “Spinoza and the Metaphysics of Scepticism”, *op. cit.*, p. 853. See also J. M. Sánchez de León “The Place of Skepticism in Spinoza’s Thought”, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2013, pp. 206-207: “Nur durch das Medium der Vielheit kann hier die Einheit, nur durch das Medium der Veränderung kann die Konstanz erfaßt werden. Und beide Bestimmungen scheiden sich nicht in der Art, daß sie sich auf verschiedene Sphären des Universums verteilen, in deren einer die Veränderlichkeit, in deren anderer die Einheit und Gleichförmigkeit herrscht.”

⁵⁹ Cf. TP, 505 [G III/274].

⁶⁰ Regarding Spinoza’s conception of the laws of nature (and the resulting drastic rejection of miracles), see D. Lachterman, “Laying Down the Law: The Theological-Political Matrix of Spinoza’s Physics”, in A. Udoff (ed.), *Leo Strauss’s Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*. Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991, pp. 123-153; see also D. Rutherford, “Spinoza’s Conception of Law: Metaphysics and Ethics”, in Y. Melamed and M. Rosenthal (eds.), *Spinoza’s Theological-Political Treatise. A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 143-167.

⁶¹ Cf. C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.

⁶² R. Boyle, *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*. Ed. E. D. Davis and M. Hunter. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Another illustrative example of this marked emphasis in the 17th century on the ontological infirmity of created beings is Malebranche and modern occasionalism in general.

⁶³ L. Daston, “Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe”, *Critical Inquiry*, (1991) 18:1, p. 122.

⁶⁴ On Spinoza’s nominalism and anti-abstractionism, see K. Hübner, “Spinoza on Universals”, in Y. Y. Melamed (ed.), *A Companion to Spinoza*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021, pp. 204-213.

⁶⁵ TIE §39, 39 (GII/34): “Therefore, so long as we are dealing with the investigation of things, we must never infer anything

human imagination.⁶⁶ Consequently, it has fancied the world as an unintelligible aggregate of beings, instead of conceiving it—in conformity with reason—as a *unitary system of relations*.⁶⁷ It is consequently not surprising, from Spinoza's point of view, that the divine essence has remained for traditional philosophy *utterly unknown and concealed*. Therefore, as we can see, Spinoza's monism—understood as the reduction of all beings to *one being*—results from the vigorous rejection of reifying, hypostatizing thinking.

3.3. Epistemological Priority of Infinity

A good case can be made that the key to these bold innovations lies in Spinoza's approach to infinity. Following Descartes, and even more decisively than him, Spinoza understands infinity as a positive notion, and not merely as negation of the finite. Indeed, infinity is for him *the most positive notion*, insofar as we conceive finite beings as particularizations and partial negations of it. By contrast to Aristotle's finitism, infinity is for Spinoza the yardstick and criterion of everything else; the rest of things are to be conceived in analogy with it and with reference to it, as derivations of infinity—both in ontological and in epistemological sense. Infinity is no longer the *other* of reason, its limit, but its “self-affirmation”.⁶⁸ Spinoza can thus declare: the intellect forms positive ideas prior than negative ones, and positive ideas express infinity.⁶⁹ Infinity is, thus, not just the first in the order of being, but also the first in the order knowledge, a *primum cognitum* and point of departure of true cognition. Because traditional philosophy has disregarded this epistemic priority of infinity and taken sense perception as the first in the order of knowledge, it has turned the order of nature upside down and failed to grasp the divine essence *quoad se*, as it is in itself.⁷⁰ The results of this misguided approach are apparent: a mutilated worldview and a concealed God.

Yet the claim that the mind knows infinity prior to the finite sounds unwarranted and contrary to good sense. It also sounds contrary to the aforementioned awareness of our particularity and biased view of things that our exposition has ascribed to Spinoza (and which would exonerate him of the charge of “dogmatism”). Indeed: how are we supposed to know infinity prior to everything else if our view of things—due to our “situatedness” within nature—is irremediably partial and biased? Shouldn't we rather infer from our finitude that infinity is totally beyond our grasp and that “the whole is a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery”⁷¹? If the admission of infinity entails—as has been observed in the introduction—a radical

relativization of our viewpoint, then the ambition of embracing infinity amounts to an utter contradiction, for we should cease to be ourselves in order to grasp the infinite.

To solve this issue and make sense of Spinoza's statements, let us first observe that knowledge of infinity—and hence of God's quiddity—in Spinoza's terms indeed entails that, in a way, *the knower and the known coincide*. By claiming that infinity comes first in the order of knowledge, Spinoza is implying that it constitutes an immediate object of cognition, and the mind can only know something *immediately* if it is intimately united with it. Now, in an obvious sense, infinity and the finite are radically different and the latter cannot possibly grasp the former (“finitum non capax infiniti”, as Calvin famously stated). Yet there is also a sense in which *they are the same*, for we have seen that the finite in Spinoza does not have a being *of its own* and God constitutes its very substance. If the finite does not exist independently of the infinite, this means that infinity is its very being, its *autós* or its own self.⁷²

The aspect of the finite that makes it radically different from the infinite is its *passivity*, i.e., its being extrinsically determined and exposed to external circumstances (for infinity has no *other*). This is also the aspect that accounts for sense perception and mutilated apprehension of reality (receptivity) in the human mind. Yet finitude is not sheer passivity and extrinsic determination, for otherwise the finite would be utter *nothingness*. Insofar as we are part of God, we partake of its positive being as well; therefore, there is something positive in us despite our limitedness, real being, *and that being is God's*. Now, this positive being is what we necessarily grasp when we grasp ourselves, i.e., when we deflect our attention from the solicitation of the senses and focus on our own being. This focus on ourselves cancels all limitations superimposed on us—for limitation is external—and reveals the infinite as our innermost nature. This fecund insight is ultimately of Cartesian origin: the same intellectual apprehension that reveals the “I” reveals the infinite as well, as two realities that belong essentially together.⁷³ Thus, Spinoza can say that the infinite is first in the order of knowledge, for its grasp coincides with our self-apprehension.

If passivity and extrinsic determination is what makes us different from God, then activity and power is precisely what makes us one and identical with him (Ep. 32; GIV/173a-174a): “For I maintain that there is also in nature an infinite power of thinking [...] I maintain that the human Mind *is the same power* [...]” This is a crucial insight, one that allows

from abstractions, and we shall take very great care not to mix up the things that are only in the intellect with those that are real.”

⁶⁶ Take for instance Spinoza's critique of the notion of “will”, understood as a faculty of the soul among others in E2p49sch.

⁶⁷ Cf. E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos*, op. cit., p. 210.

⁶⁸ Cf. E. Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*. Vol. 1. Berlin: Verlag Bruno Cassirer, 1922, pp. 27-28. Cassirer refers in this passage to Nicholas of Cusa, but his words can be suitably applied to Spinoza as well.

⁶⁹ TIE §108, 43-44 (GII/39).

⁷⁰ See E2p10sch, GII/93-94.

⁷¹ David Hume, *Natural History of Religion*. Ed. J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 185.

⁷² Spinoza's views on this issue feature striking parallels with those of his contemporary and compatriot Arnold Geulincx, usually labeled as an “occasionalist”. See J. M. Sánchez de León Serrano, “Arnold Geulincx: Scepticism and Mental Holism”, in Y. Meyrav (ed.), *Yearbook of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020.

⁷³ See AT VII, 51. Regarding this essential “togetherness” of the self and infinity in Descartes, see M. Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*. Vol. I. Paris: Aubier, 1968, pp. 244-247; S. Turró, “La no-univocitat de la substància com a metafísica de la causació”, *Anuari de la societat catalana de filosofia*, 8 (1996), p. 116; É. Mehl, *Descartes et la fabrique du monde. Le problème cosmologique de Copernic à Descartes*. Paris: PUF, 2019, pp. 121-125.

Spinoza to depart from the long-standing tradition of the *Deus absconditus* and to boldly claim that the mind can have adequate knowledge of God's quiddity. According to E1p34, God is essentially power: his essence is therefore to generate, produce—i.e., “*natura naturans*”.⁷⁴ The rest of things are “made” things: produced, generated, and, in this respect, derivative, not primordial—i.e., “*natura naturata*”. Every particular and determinate entity—whether corporeal or mental—is for Spinoza “*natura naturata*”, hence derivative. For this very reason, no particular concept or notion can adequately convey the divine essence. Only the primordial activity from which all particular thoughts flow—i.e., thinking as such—can adequately express the divine essence. Now, as the aforementioned quotation shows, the human mind is the *same power of thinking* in which the divine nature essentially consists. Therefore, by apprehending our own thinking activity (“*cogito*”), we grasp the essential and intimate nature of the divine. A similar reasoning can be applied to corporeality and extension. No particular body or region of space can adequately convey God's infinite essence, which is the ultimate source of all bodies and physical configurations, only extension as such. “*Absoluta cogitatio*” and “*absoluta extensio*” are thus the only notions (known to us) that appropriately convey God's intimate essence as *natura naturans*. They constitute the starting points of knowledge; they are the absolute and infinite contents through which we conceive everything else. Spinoza can thus triumphantly say (E2p46): “The human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.”

4. Concluding Remarks: The Abrahamic Excess Overtaken

We have argued that Crescas' philosophical endeavor aims to reshape the philosophical discourse in order to make it more conform to the revealed message. In this respect, and as has been repeatedly observed (following Brague's terminology), his thought constitutes a revolt of “Abraham” against “Timaeus”. But philosophy for Crescas, although it can bear witness to the truth of religion, is not the locus of revelation as such, only an external medium of sorts.⁷⁵ In the case of Spinoza, by contrast, the human mind is able to adequately grasp God's infinite and eternal essence, precisely because the divine nature is the very substance of the human mind, which thus apprehends itself and the divine nature *in the same noetic act*. In this respect, God is not for Spinoza a *Deus absconditus*, and the human mind can therefore be considered the privileged locus of divine revelation. Spinoza can thus affirm (TTP I, 78, GIII/16, italics

mine): “Therefore, since our mind—simply from the fact that it contains God's Nature objectively in itself, and participates in it—has the power to form certain notions which explain the nature of things and teach us how to conduct our lives, *we can rightly maintain that the nature of the mind, insofar as it is conceived in this way, is the first cause of divine revelation (merito mentis naturam, quatenus talis concipitur, primam divinae revelationis causam statuere possumus).*”

Under these conditions, it can no longer be held that philosophy conceptualizes a message received from an external source, as Crescas would have it. Religion, therefore, cannot claim a privileged access to the divine essence; “Abraham” cannot assert any prerogative before rational thinking. Rather, human reason, by virtue of its connaturality with the divine essence, may well now subject “Abraham” to a critical scrutiny and assess its truth in terms of its conformity with rationality. This is precisely what Spinoza sets out to do in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Hence, if “Abraham” once represented an uncontrollable excess for philosophy, this excess has now been overtaken by a philosophy that claims to be the true access to the divine.

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⁷⁴ Cf. F. Mignini, “Le Dieu-substance de Spinoza comme *potentia absoluta*”, in G. Canziani, M. A. Granada and Y. C. Zarka (eds.), *Potentia Dei. L'onnipotenza divina nel pensiero dei secoli XVI e XVII*. Milano: Francoangeli, 2000, pp. 387–409. Spinoza can be seen as the real initiator of the primacy of “acting” over “being” that Fischbach attributes to Leibniz and which will find its apex in German Idealism. See F. Fischbach, *L'être et l'acte. Enquête sur les fondements de l'ontologie moderne de l'agir*. Paris: Vrin, 2002.

⁷⁵ Cf. W. Z. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p.: “Crescas is unequivocal about this. Physical proofs can at best give one an *inclination*. True knowledge of God is not achieved by philosophers, but by prophets.”

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