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978-1-107-03786-1 - Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy

Edited by Steven Nadler

Excerpt

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Introduction

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Once upon a time, Bento (in Hebrew, Baruch; and in Latin, Benedictus) Spinoza was regularly seen as a thinker in a Jewish philosophical tradition.¹ In the century after Spinoza's death in 1677, the "Jewishness" of his philosophy was virtually taken for granted. It was considered, however, primarily a matter of Spinoza's relationship to ancient and medieval Jewish mysticism. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, it was not uncommon to regard Spinoza's philosophy – especially the *Ethics* – as deeply imbued with kabbalistic and occult themes.² In the eighteenth century, Jacques Basnage, in his grand *Histoire des Juifs, depuis Jesus Christ jusqu'à présent* (1705), included Spinoza in his discussion of kabbalah, which he sees as the source of his "obscure and mystical" ideas.³ Later that century, Solomon Maimon asserted that "kabbalah is nothing but extended Spinozism,"⁴ an opinion that the great twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem would second.⁵

¹ I speak of *a* Jewish philosophical tradition rather than *the* Jewish philosophical tradition mainly because I am not so sure there is such a thing as the latter, given the diversity (and possible incompatibility) of philosophical traditions within Judaism.

² See, for example, the two books by J. G. Wachter, *Der Spinozismus im Juedenthumb, oder die von dem heutigen Juedenthumb und dessen Geheimen Kabbala Vergoetterte Welt* (Amsterdam, 1699), and *Elucidarius Cabalisticus sive reconditae Hebraeorum philosophiae recensio* (Rome, 1706). According to Wachter, the kabbalah is "Spinozism before Spinoza."

³ Basnage 1716, Book IV, Chapter 7. Popkin (1992, 387–409) provides a possible explanation as to why other early modern figures believed Spinoza's philosophy to be kabbalistic.

⁴ See his autobiography, *Solomon Maimon's Lebensgeschichte von ihm selbst beschrieben*, Part I, Chapter 14 (Maimon 1793, 162).

⁵ See Scholem (1941, 258). This tendency has continued, to some degree, in recent scholarship. Thus, Levy (1989), despite his recognition of the importance of Maimonides to Spinoza's philosophical development, and apparently without intending to assert that Spinoza was an unqualified mystic or a kabbalist, nonetheless believes that Spinoza's "pantheism" comes from earlier, mystical trends in Judaism. "The pivotal concept of Spinoza's metaphysics – the intellectual love of God," he insists, "derives its origin . . . from mysticism" (28). To be fair to Levy, he does insist that "the comparisons between Spinoza's thought and the kabbalah must, however, be treated very carefully and *cum grano salis*" (30). See also Brann 1977 and Hubbeling 1977.

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Seasoned Spinoza scholars now view this as a seriously distorted picture of Spinoza's philosophy. While there certainly are elements of his metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy that may strike *us* as "mysticist" – in part because they are rather opaque to interpretation, as well as often couched in a mystic-like vocabulary (witness Spinoza's use of the term 'intuition' for the highest kind of knowledge, and his extolling the "intellectual love of God" as the path to happiness and salvation) – any careful reader of his writings will be struck by the arch-rationalism that deeply informs his thought.

Of course, it is easy to see in Spinoza precisely what one wants to see – in this sense, he functions as a kind of intellectual Rorschach test. Spinoza has been a hero or a heretic to a remarkable variety of causes. There seem to be as many Spinozas as there are audiences seeking to appropriate him for their philosophical, political, or religious ends. There is the "God intoxicated" Spinoza of the German Romantics, a pantheist who saw the divine throughout nature; and Spinoza the immoral atheist, a man vilified by his contemporaries as the author of what one overwrought critic (referring to the *Theological-Political Treatise* called "a book forged in hell with the help of the Devil.") There is Spinoza the Jewish reformer and Spinoza the anti-Semite. In philosophy, Spinoza is said to be a Cartesian, a Hobbesian, a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a Stoic, and a Machiavellian, among other persuasions. He is also a socialist, a Zionist, an anarchist, a Jeffersonian republican, the source of the Radical Enlightenment, and so on.

Missing from all of these portraits, however, is something that captures not so much what Spinoza represents to others, but an essential feature of what he authentically is: a metaphysical, moral, religious, and political thinker who belongs to the history of Jewish philosophy, a true secular modern who simultaneously assimilates, transforms, and subverts an ancient and religious project.

Despite attempts to "marranize" Spinoza's personal experience,⁶ his upbringing and education took place within an open, well-established, albeit (because of its historical *converso* roots) not always perfectly orthodox Jewish community. It is true that his parents had been through the *converso* experience, in Portugal and, in the case of his father, France. But Spinoza himself grew up under the watchful eyes of the rabbis of Amsterdam's Portuguese *kehilla*: he attended the elementary school of

⁶ Yovel 1989. For a critique of Yovel's reading, see Van Bunge 2001.

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the united Talmud Torah congregation, paid his dues as an upstanding member of the community, and (after taking over his father's mercantile business) most likely continued his adult studies in the Keter Torah yeshiva run by the congregation's chief rabbi, the Ashkenazic import Saul Levi Mortera.

In July 1656, however, Spinoza was expelled from the Amsterdam Portuguese community with the harshest writ of *herem* (ostracism) ever issued by its leaders. The only extant documentation of this event, the *herem* text itself, refers to his "abominable heresies" and "monstrous deeds," but it still remains something of a mystery why exactly Spinoza was punished with such extreme prejudice. It has been suggested that the cause of his expulsion lay in certain financial irregularities – in particular, because he went outside the jurisdiction of the Portuguese community to the Dutch authorities in order to relieve himself of debts he inherited from his father, in direct violation of the community's regulations.⁷ However, in light of the vitriolic language of the *herem*, its extraordinary harshness when compared with other expulsions from the period, as well as the reference to "abominable heresies," it is hard to believe that it all amounted to merely a legal matter. More likely, it was a question of ideas – in particular, just the kind of bold philosophical, theological, and religious views that Spinoza would begin expressing in his written works within a couple of years.

Be that as it may, the expulsion order was never rescinded, and Spinoza lived the rest of his life outside any Jewish context. In fact, he seems not to have had any residual sense of Jewish identity. In his writings, he goes out of his way to distance himself from Judaism, and always refers to the Jews in the third person – as "them." Nor does he exhibit any fundamental sympathy with Jewish history or culture; indeed, he seems to harbor a degree of hostility to the Jewish people, about whom he has some very unkind things to say.

And yet it can hardly be said that Spinoza's break with Judaism was perfectly clean and complete. Things are rarely so black and white in the history of ideas, least of all with as deep and complex a philosopher as Spinoza. While he may no longer have thought of himself as a Jew, and while he even had great contempt for Judaism and other organized sectarian religions, it cannot be denied that Jewish texts, history, and thought continued to play an important role in Spinoza's thinking – so much so that Spinoza can rightfully be considered a Jewish philosopher, both because his

⁷ See Vlessing 1996.

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ideas exhibit a strong engagement with earlier Jewish philosophy and because in his major works he philosophized about Judaism.⁸

For a long time, however, a reader of the literature on Spinoza would have had little reason for thinking this. Scholarship on Spinoza in the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century, especially in the Anglo-American tradition but also to some degree in France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany – when scholars even took account of context – was focused almost exclusively on the seventeenth-century philosophical background: primarily Descartes and Cartesianism, but also Hobbes, Leibniz, and others, including fellow Dutch thinkers of the republican political persuasion. To be sure, this is an extremely important framework for understanding Spinoza's thought, and the result of this scholarship, in books and articles, was great and influential insights into his philosophy.⁹

Moreover, it would not be fair to say that the Jewish context was completely ignored in this extended period. It is nearly impossible to write about the TTP without discussing Maimonides, primarily because Spinoza explicitly takes the author of the *Guide of the Perplexed* to task for his account of the interpretation of Scripture. Thus, works of European scholarship such as (Rabbi) Manuel Joël's *Spinoza's Theologisch-politischer Traktat auf seine Quellen geprüft* (Breslau, 1870) and Leo Strauss's *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* (Berlin, 1930) include comparative analyses of Maimonides and Spinoza on Biblical hermeneutic, the relationship between reason and revelation, and other issues.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Leon Roth's short but valuable book *Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides* (Oxford, 1924) recognizes Maimonides' influence upon Spinoza in matters beyond just the theologico-political; indeed, at one point Roth suggests that on certain topics "Maimonides and Spinoza speak . . . with one voice" (143–144).¹¹

Above all, there is the magisterial work of Harry Austryn Wolfson. In his two-volume *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Harvard, 1934), Wolfson insisted on intimate connections between the ideas in Spinoza's *Ethics* and the doctrines of medieval Jewish rationalists such as Maimonides and Gersonides,

⁸ Thus it seems perfectly right that Spinoza should appear in most recent histories of and "companions" to Jewish philosophy, either as the culmination of the medieval tradition or the beginning of the modern. See, for example, Frank and Leaman 2003.

⁹ Bennett 1984 and Curley 1969, as well as Alquié 1981 and Gueroult 1968.

¹⁰ See also Pines 1968. More recent studies of the TTP that take due note of Maimonides include Chalier 2006, Levene 2004, Preus 2001, and Verbeek 2003.

¹¹ Likewise, Pines (Maimonides 1963, xcvi) has claimed that Maimonides' God is "perilously close to Spinoza's attribute of thought (or to his Intellect of God)."

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as well as other figures. It was never any secret that Spinoza had closely studied the *Guide of the Perplexed*. But to claim that the highly opaque, extraordinarily difficult *Ethics*, which (unlike the TTP) does not once mention any other thinker by name, was also influenced by what Spinoza read in Maimonides – as well as in Gersonides’ *Wars of the Lord*, and in the works of Judah Halevi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Solomon ibn Gabirol – was a bold and original thesis. One need not accept all of Wolfson’s conclusions, particularly when he suggests that most of Spinoza’s philosophy is nothing but a kind of pastiche of earlier Jewish, Arabic, and Latin-Scholastic thought or when he claims that Spinoza was concerned to defend what Wolfson regards as certain traditional rabbinic doctrines (such as the immortality of the soul). But it can be said that Wolfson’s study opened the door to seeing Spinoza as a thinker deeply engaged with Jewish philosophy, and not just because of some perceived echoes of kabbalah or because Spinoza engaged Maimonides head on in the TTP.

Throughout the twentieth century, then, it was certainly not unheard of to look at Spinoza’s ideas in a Jewish philosophical context, and perhaps even to think of him, in some sense, as a “Jewish thinker.” There were a few exceptional examples of learned scholarship that took account of the Judaic intellectual milieu and textual traditions to which Spinoza, alone among major early modern philosophers, had access. Moreover, virtually every “History,” “Encyclopedia,” or “Companion” to Jewish philosophy published in the last hundred years has seen fit to include some discussion of Spinoza.

Still, something seemed to be missing. Only a small number of scholars took up Wolfson’s challenge in a serious way in the decades after the appearance of his book. Analytically oriented philosophers, more concerned with dissecting and evaluating Spinoza’s theses and arguments (to be sure, often with great results), were only rarely interested in the historico-philosophical context, and not at all in the Jewish philosophical angle. The shortcomings of this approach were particularly evident when scholars expressed frustration over their inability to make sense of one or another important but apparently mystifying features of Spinoza’s metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy – for example, Spinoza’s doctrine of the eternity of the mind in Part Five of the *Ethics*, a doctrine which, it might be argued, can only be understood in the light of the views of Maimonides and Gersonides.¹² In the philosophical literature on Spinoza throughout most of the last century, studies like those of

¹² Nadler 2001.

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Strauss, Roth, Joël, and Wolfson remained the exception rather than the rule, and it was unusual to find a deep, systematic, and substantive study of Spinoza in relationship to his Jewish philosophical ancestors, and even rarer to find such a Judaic contextualizing discussion of the *Ethics*.¹³

In the second half of the twentieth century, great progress was made in understanding the Sephardic and Dutch-Jewish contexts of Spinoza's life. This was due in part to a number of studies that (thanks to some important archival discoveries) illuminated various aspects of the world of Amsterdam Jewry in the seventeenth century. We gained deeper insights into the Jewish dimensions of Spinoza's early biography and a better understanding of the personal and historical circumstances of his intellectual development. Among these studies are books and articles by the eminent historians I. S. Révah, Yosef Kaplan, Jonathan Israel, Richard Popkin, Henri Méchoulan, and Gabriel Albiac.¹⁴

All of this historical work was essential, of course. But it left untouched, in the post-Wolfson period, the more intricate philosophical task of identifying Jewish elements in Spinoza's thought, and doing so not impressionistically and haphazardly but with solid comparative analyses and arguments.¹⁵ This project was not really initiated in a serious way until an important and influential 1984 article by Warren Zev Harvey, in which he attempts "to sketch a portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean, as the last major representative of a tradition that mightily dominated Jewish philosophy for almost five centuries following the appearance of the *Guide of the Perplexed*."¹⁶ Harvey covers a limited number of topics on which the two thinkers can be fruitfully compared – the distinction between intellect and imagination, a shared contempt for anthropomorphism in the depiction of God, and the intellectual love of God as our *summum bonum* – and he really only outlines a program for further research. But Harvey nonetheless, fifty years after Wolfson, took seriously the spirit of the latter's program and

¹³ I am concerned here mainly with the philosophical secondary literature on Spinoza and the way it addresses his relationship to earlier Jewish thought. By contrast, there has always been within the Jewish intellectual and literary tradition a tendency to recognize Spinoza as one of its own (although in very different ways throughout history). For an excellent review of this topic, see Schwartz 2012.

¹⁴ Révah (1959) was extraordinarily important in this regard, although I am skeptical that De Prado played an important role in Spinoza's intellectual development. I should also mention the earlier groundbreaking work of Carl Gebhardt (especially Gebhardt 1922) and of A. M. Vaz Dias and W. G. Van der Tak (Vaz Dias and Van der Tak 1932).

¹⁵ I should mention, however, Brykman 1972, which considers some Jewish themes she finds informing Spinoza's thought; and Levy 1972 and 1989.

¹⁶ W. Harvey 1981.

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began the process of looking closely at what could in fact be justifiably said about Spinoza's relationship to Maimonides (and, by implication, other medieval Jewish philosophers). While Wolfson's study was all over the place, throwing around passages helter-skelter (often without explanation), Harvey called for a more selective approach and more careful and critical scrutiny.

The situation when Harvey was writing was such that he could still say that portraying Spinoza as a Maimonidean "is admittedly controversial . . . it generally has not been held that there was a *distinctive* Maimonidean influence on Spinoza's philosophy."¹⁷ It is hard to imagine anyone now being worried about making this kind of claim. In recent articles, Heidi Ravven,¹⁸ Carlos Fraenkel,¹⁹ Idit Dobbs-Weinstein,²⁰ and others have rightly taken it for granted that there is much to be gained by reading Spinoza in a Jewish philosophical context and have followed Harvey's lead by pursuing a deeper and more rigorous investigation of Spinoza's relationship to medieval Jewish rationalism on such topics as the nature of prophecy and the proper conception of God. Ravven, for example, has argued that while Spinoza certainly rejects Maimonides' view that the prophets were philosophers and that the Bible offers insights into central philosophical doctrines (particularly those of Aristotle), he nonetheless was greatly influenced by the Maimonidean account of the imaginative character and political utility of the prophetic writings in the Bible. And Fraenkel has drawn our attention to important parallels between Maimonides' God as "the *causa immanens* of all existents" and Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*, despite Spinoza's apparent break (due to his monism) with central features of the conception of God in the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. Meanwhile, volumes such as *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*²¹ and the issue of *Studia Spinozana* devoted to the topic "Spinoza and Jewish identity" (2003) offer a wide range of studies by Spinoza experts and Jewish studies scholars on the relationship between Spinoza's metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, and political thought, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Jewish philosophical and religious thought – traditional and otherwise.

Over the last two decades, then, some elements of this (Jewish) part of the story of Spinoza's philosophy – as opposed to his biography – have begun to be filled in. We are beginning to get a fuller, if not necessarily simpler, picture of Spinoza's relationship to earlier Jewish thought. It thus seems a

¹⁷ *Ibid.* ¹⁸ Ravven 2001a and 2001b. ¹⁹ Fraenkel 2006.²⁰ Dobbs-Weinstein 1994 and 2004. ²¹ Ravven and Goodman 2002.

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good time to take stock and consider the state of things. Thus, in conceiving this volume I turned to a number of leading scholars and asked them to write essays in which they address some aspect or another of the relationship between Spinoza's philosophy and medieval Jewish philosophy.

There was never any assumption that this volume should be an exhaustive study of all the aspects of this relationship; the goal was not completeness. The invitation to participate specified only that the authors should focus on some specific problem and/or philosopher(s), and not concern themselves with grand overviews or comprehensive surveys. I gave no particular directions whatsoever as to what topic to address or whom to include. Part of the interest of the project would be to discover how these scholars would approach the issue. In this regard, the essays represent an exercise in contingency: upon whom would these experts in Spinoza's philosophy and Jewish thought call to illuminate which features of his metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, religious thought, and political ideas?

Not surprisingly, given his stature in the history of Jewish philosophy and his obvious importance for Spinoza, most of the authors decided to focus on Maimonides. Thus, it may seem as if there is something of an imbalance in this volume. However, if the result of this is that we gain a deeper and more detailed understanding of the various dimensions and complexities of Spinoza's relationship to the twelfth-century rabbi, physician, and thinker who was the greatest of all Jewish philosophers, then the topical unevenness of the volume is something we should be able to live with.

Jacob Adler's "Mortality of the soul from Alexander of Aphrodisias to Spinoza" considers what he claims is a likely (and illuminating) source for Spinoza's heterodox views on the nature and fate of the soul, as well as for his "ratio of motion and rest" account of the individuation of body. He argues that Spinoza's denial of personal immortality, especially in the *Short Treatise*, bears a close resemblance to the theory of the "acquired intellect" in Alexander (that it is, in fact, "an Alexandrist theory of immortality"), and that Spinoza was likely influenced, directly or indirectly, by Alexander's doctrine. Adler thus considers various possible contemporary sources for Spinoza's acquaintance with Alexander's ancient theory, as well as what seems to be a change in doctrine in the *Ethics*.

In his chapter "Spinoza and the determinist tradition in medieval Jewish philosophy," Charles Manekin considers in particular the effect that Crescas's starkly deterministic position might have had on Spinoza's

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doctrine that “all things are determined . . . not only to exist but also to exist and to act in a definite way” (*Ethics* Ip9d). He notes that there appear to be at least two fundamental differences between Crescas and Spinoza on the question of determinism and free will. First, Spinoza holds that “all things have been predetermined by God, not from freedom of the will, or absolute good pleasure but from God’s absolute nature, or infinite power.” Crescas, on the other hand, says that God wills the world into existence through beneficence and grace, taking pleasure in this activity. Second, although Crescas and Spinoza are both strict determinists, the former has generally been read by scholars as a *soft* determinist, i.e. one who holds that humans *deserve* divine reward and punishment when and only when they act voluntarily – even though all things, including human volitions, are determined. By contrast, Spinoza, a hard determinist, claims that notions like praise and blame arise from the illusory belief that humans possess free will. Manekin argues that the first difference, while real, is not as great as it seems, and that the second difference is no difference at all. His thesis is that Crescas is best read, like Spinoza, as a hard determinist who dispenses with the deservedness of divine reward and punishment, and in fact dispenses with a desert model of divine justice altogether.

Tamar Rudavsky’s essay, “The science of Scripture: Abraham ibn Ezra and Spinoza on biblical hermeneutics,” also focuses on the TTP. She compares Ibn Ezra’s theory of Bible science with that of Spinoza. Her purpose is twofold: to emphasize the importance of science in their respective readings of Scripture, and to gauge the extent to which Spinoza radicalizes Ibn Ezra’s readings of Scripture. She argues that both Ibn Ezra and Spinoza make use of scientific discourse in their analysis of the Bible; this application of scientific method to biblical hermeneutics attests to the attempts of both thinkers to render all intellectual enterprises rigorous and amenable to rational scrutiny.

Steven Frankel’s essay, “Spinoza’s rejection of Maimonideanism,” approaches the complexities and apparent inconsistencies of Spinoza’s relationship to Maimonides. He begins by examining the disagreement among contemporary scholars on this issue: some emphasize Spinoza’s kinship with Maimonides, while others focus on the comprehensiveness of his critique. By examining the passages where Spinoza explicitly criticizes his great predecessor, Frankel argues that their minor differences over hermeneutical issues reveal a much more radical disagreement about the possibility of enlightening the multitude and making politics and religion more consistent with reason. He then explores how Spinoza’s political project is shaped by his view that there is an unbridgeable chasm

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between, on the one hand, philosophy and, on the other hand, religion and politics.

Warren Zev Harvey, after noting some parallels between Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and Spinoza's *Ethics*, begins "*Ishq, Hesheq, and amor Dei intellectualis*" with a puzzle that he finds in both texts: how can pleasure and love be attributed to the intellect when it has "no relation to the body." This "problem" leads him to an analysis of the connections between the Arabic '*ishq*' and the Hebrew '*hesheq*' in Maimonides and the Latin '*amor Dei intellectualis*' in Spinoza. Harvey shows how Spinoza's use of the intellectual love of God in *Ethics*, Part Five, is indebted to Maimonides' discussion of the love of God in *Guide* III.51. As he traces the history of these terms from Al-Farabi, through Avicenna, Maimonides, and Gersonides, to Spinoza, Harvey shows how, in fact, the idea of intellectual passion goes back to Aristotle, for whom the idea is also problematic. If it seems more problematic in Spinoza, Harvey argues, it is only because he exerted the greatest effort to make philosophic sense of it.

Ken Seeskin, in "Monotheism at bay: the Gods of Maimonides and Spinoza," offers a comparative analysis of the theologies of the two philosophers. He looks especially at the anti-anthropomorphism that characterizes the Maimonidean and Spinozist conceptions of God. At the same time, he argues, there is an important difference between the thinkers on the question of the moral and theological value of humility. For Maimonides, Seeskin insists, humility is "the chief theological virtue," whereby one is "to bow one's head in the face of something too vast to understand." For Spinoza, on the other hand, humility is not a virtue; rather, its opposite, self-esteem, is what arises from the proper use of reason.

In "Moral agency without free will: Spinoza's naturalizing of moral psychology in a Maimonidean key," Heidi Ravven argues that in the *Ethics* Spinoza develops an account of moral agency that envisions a path of transformation toward ever greater and broader constitution of the individual in and with the environment. Hence Spinoza's theory cannot be considered to fall within compatibilist accounts of free will. According to Ravven, the power of the mind that Spinoza develops in the *Ethics* is its power to contextualize its own experience, its own embodied engagements and interrelations, within the infinite webs of nature. Thus the mind in furthering its knowledge always captures, reframes, and expands its initial and ongoing constitutive relations and relatedness, with a concomitant transformation in motivation, that is, in the scope and power of the *conatus*. She concludes by showing that Spinoza's account of moral agency reflects Maimonides' claim that coming to know, as far as humanly possible, God's