Journal of Modern Philosophy

Spinozism, Kabbalism, and Idealism from Johann Georg Wachter to Moses Mendelssohn

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The paper studies the historical background for the 'idealist' reading of Spinoza usually traced back to British and German Idealism. Here, I follow this history further back than and focus on one earlier idealist reading, indeed perhaps the mother of them all. It can be found in the *Elucidarius cabalisticus, sive reconditae Hebraeorum philosophiae brevis et succincta recensio* by Johann Georg Wachter, a kabbalist interpretation of Spinoza published in 1706. I am principally interested in the importance that Wachter's book may have had for German philosophy in the second half of the eighteenth century. Focusing on Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* of 1755, I argue that, via Mendelssohn, the Elucidarius cabalisticus is perhaps the earliest possible source of the idealist reading of Spinoza that dominated the German *Spinozabild* from throughout the *Pantheismusstreit* up to the second edition of Herder's 1800 *Gott: Einige Gespräche*, culminating with Hegel's 'acosmist' reading of Spinoza in the 1825–26 lectures on the history of philosophy.

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KEYWORDS:
Spinoza; Wachter; Mendelssohn; Idealism; Kabbalah

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Lærke, Mogens. 2021. Spinozism, Kabbalism, and Idealism from Johann Georg Wachter to Moses Mendelssohn. *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, 3(1): 3, pp. 1–20. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.150*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper,[1] I study an aspect of the historical background for the 'idealist' reading of Spinoza that, in the wake of Michael Della Rocca's influential hyper-rationalist approach to Spinoza and an associated spike in interest in the relations between Spinoza and both German and British idealism, has become the topic of a still growing literature over the last decade or so.[2] Here, I want to trace this history further back than usual and focus on an earlier idealist reading of Spinoza, indeed among the earliest of them all. It can be found in the *Elucidarius cabalisticus, sive reconditae Hebraeorum philosophiae brevis et succincta recensio* by Johann Georg Wachter, a kabbalist interpretation of Spinoza published in 1706. I am principally interested in the importance that Wachter's book had for German philosophy in the second half of the eighteenth century. Many commentators have discussed, in more or less detail, what the protagonists in the *Pantheissmusstreit* thought about the relation between Spinozism and Kabbalah generally.[3] I believe, however, that the exact contribution of Johann Georg Wachter's work has not been adequately appreciated. I argue that the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* likely contributed importantly to the discussions that eventually produced the staunchly idealist reading of Spinoza that dominated the German *Spinozabild* from Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755) through the *Pantheismusstreit* up to the second edition of Herder's *Gott: Einige Gespräche* (1800), culminating with Hegel's 'acosmist' reading of Spinoza in the 1825–26 lectures on the history of philosophy.[4] If I am correct about that, it is of course not only of importance for Spinoza scholars. Anyone familiar with German philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is aware of the deep impact that Spinoza's philosophy had on philosophy generally during that period (see, e.g., Förster and Melamed 2012; Lærke and Moreau 2021). At first, this was because the discussion of Spinozism was inextricably wound up in the contemporary issue regarding the religious compatibility of Enlightenment philosophy with Christian religion. Later, it was because Spinoza's monism, when dressed up in new dialectical garb, represented a precursor to the kind of pantheist natural philosophy championed by the German idealists. If, however, the interpretation of Spinoza was such a central issue for German philosophy generally, and if Wachter, along with other more well-known sources such as Pierre Bayle and Christian Wolff, helped shape the interpretation of Spinoza, then, by extension, Wachter and his assimilation of Spinoza to Kabbalah likely contributed to steering German philosophy in the direction it took during the Enlightenment and in German Idealism.

As we shall see, Wachter was explicitly cited and extensively discussed in some key texts of the *Pantheismusstreit*, in Jacobi and Herder in particular. This is not disputed. Here, however, I try to determine Wachter's point of entry into these German debates, in texts where Wachter's presence is more discreet and his possible impact less easy to demonstrate. I focus on Moses Mendelssohn's 1755 *Philosophische Gespräche*. Those dialogues and the interpretations of the relation between the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz they propose are well-known. Alexander Altman and Dominique Bourel have written important papers on the topic (Altmann 1966; Bourel 1981; Bourel 1988). Detlef Pätzold has studied the dialogues in detail in the context of Mendelssohn's broader engagement with Spinozism (Pätzold 2011). Moreover, the central role of the *Philosophische*

1 The paper expands and corrects research also presented in French in Lærke (2016). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

2 For two texts that highlight these connections particularly well, see Newlands (2011a) and Newlands (2011b). For an overview of the discussions around Della Rocca's work up until 2014, see Lærke (2014b). To the literature cited there should be added in particular Della Rocca (2015) and Garber (2015).

3 On Kabbalah in Lessing, see Hammacher (1982). For Jacobi and Mendelssohn, see Altman (1971), Timm (1974: 156–59), Rosenstock (2010: 92–94), Scholem (1984), Gottlieb (2011: 94–95), Wulf (2012: 107). For Jacobi and Herder, see Christ (1988: 165–68). On Jacobi, Kant and Maimon, see Franks (2007: 64–67). On Hegel, Spinoza and Kabbalah, see Franks (2018). Generally on Spinoza and Kabbalah, see finally Hammacher (1985) and Kilcher (1994). Maïmon also assimilated Spinoza and Kabbalah, but hardly needed Wachter to work out his position. On Maimon, Spinozism, and Kabbalah, see Engstler (1994) and Melamed (2004).

4 For Hegel's clearest statement of Spinoza's acosmism, see Hegel (1955: 281): 'If Spinoza is called an atheist for the sole reason that he does not distinguish God from the world, it is a misuse of the term. Spinozism might really just as well or even better have been termed acosmism, since according to its teaching it is not to the world, finite existence, the universe, that reality and permanency are to be ascribed, but rather to God alone as the substantial.' See also Melamed (2010).

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

Gespräche for the later pantheism controversy is broadly acknowledged. The book was debated throughout the entire second part of the eighteenth century. Lessing, for example, criticized Mendelssohn's analyses for being 'sophistical' in a famous text of 1763 entitled *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen* (Lessing 1970–79: vol. 8). Mendelssohn responded in a letter written early in the summer the same year, a text I shall return to later in this paper. Moving another two decades forward in time, in the 1785 *Über Die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, Jacobi used Mendelssohn's analyses in a way contrary to their original purpose, trying to discredit Leibniz by means of the association to Spinoza (Jacobi 1994). Finally, Mendelssohn himself reused his own interpretation, in *Morgenstunden* (1785) and in *An die Freunde Lessings* (1786), but this time in order to reject Spinoza rather than the contrary (Mendelssohn 2011; Mendelssohn 1786).

The interpretation of the relations between Leibniz and Spinoza that Mendelssohn developed in the *Philosophische Gespräche* thus had considerable influence throughout the entire second half of the century as a common reference for the protagonists in the *Pantheismusstreit*. It was an interpretation on which most of them took a position and, for this reason, it also provided a shared framework for them to engage with each other. Mendelssohn's text set the stage for their philosophical discussions by laying down some of the basic terms of a shared image of Spinoza that largely persisted up until, and including, Hegel's time. That image was largely what is called today, and what Mendelssohn already called, an 'idealist' image of Spinoza. It is thus my claim that, if it can be shown that Wachter's work informed the idealist reading of Spinoza that first occurred in Mendelssohn's dialogues, it can also be argued that Wachter contributed to the emergence of that reading in general.

2. WACHTER AND HIS RECEPTION

Wachter wrote two books dedicated to the relations between Spinoza and Kabbalah. Before the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* appeared in 1706, he had already published a book entitled *Der Spinozismus im Jüdenthumb oder die von dem heutigen Jüdenthumb und dessen geheimen Kabbala Vergötterte Welt* in 1699. In both books, he defended the thesis that Spinoza had given philosophical voice to Kabbalah or that Spinozism was a conceptually distilled expression of the 'philosophy of the Hebrews'.

The first book, *Der Spinozismus im Jüdenthumb*, was a reply to a certain Moses Germanus, the 'German Moses', in reality named Johan Peter Spaeth. A former collaborator of Baron Christian Knorr von Rosenroth—a German Rosicrucian and editor of the Latin text anthology *Kabbala Denudata* (1677–84)—Spaeth was a tormented Christian who had vacillated between various confessions until finally converting to Judaism and embracing Kabbalah. Incidentally, this conversion story had been somewhat of an embarrassment for those Christian philosophers and theologians who explored Jewish thinking, including Kabbalah, in order to strengthen Christian doctrine (Coudert 2004; Rensoli 2011). In this first book, Wachter then set out to demonstrate, against Spaeth, that Kabbalah was incompatible with all religion since it was really a form of Spinozism. At that time, as the vast majority of his contemporaries, Wachter considered Spinozism an atheistic and thus deplorable doctrine.

In his second book, the *Elucidarius cabalisticus*, Wachter took a very different approach to the same topic. Here, he replied to the German orientalist Johann Franz Budde who, in his *Defensio cabbalae Ebraeorum* from 1700, had defended Kabbalah against the accusation of Spinozism. Budde argued that the Kabbalah denounced by Wachter was not authentic but only Isaac Luria's recent *pseudo-cabbala*. Wachter's focus changed accordingly: whereas in the first book he simply aimed at establishing a connection between Kabbalah and Spinozism, in the second, he was rather discussing which version or interpretation of Kabbalah was similar to Spinozism and whether this Spinozist type corresponded to the authentic Kabbalah or not. This difference in approach was, however, not the only or even the most remarkable change in Wachter's assessment. He had also changed his mind regarding the religious orthodoxy of Spinozism. He now argued that Spinoza 'has acknowledged the divinity of Christ and the truth of the entire Christian religion' (Wachter 1706:

7). In the first three parts of the *Elucidarius*, dedicated, respectively, to the origin, propagation and the doctrine of Kabbalah, he thus attempted to demonstrate the agreement between Kabbalah and Christian religion. And in the fourth part, entitled *De consensus cabalae et Spinozae* he went on to show how Spinozism could 'elucidate' this genuinely Christian Kabbalah by providing it with the philosophy corresponding to it.

Wachter is far from unknown among intellectual historians. His books have received a fair amount of attention in the work by Gerschom Scholem, Winfried Schröder, Jonathan Israel, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggeman, Martin Mulsow, Miquel Beltran, and several others.[5] The two books are often considered important contributions to the more subversive or, in Israel's vocabulary, 'radical' early German Enlightenment. Wachter is, however, rarely cited as a genuine authority on Spinoza's philosophy. And yet, in Spinoza's own time, he was considered differently. John Toland, who met and discussed with Wachter at the Court of Berlin just after 1700, noted in his *Letters to Serena* that Wachter was generally considered a great expert on Spinoza's philosophy.[6] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who also met Wachter in Berlin at that time, took a very serious interest in Wachter's work in philosophy and read several of his works.[7] Most importantly, around 1707, he composed a detailed commentary on the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* (the Leibniz editor Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil first published the text in 1854 under the decidedly misleading title *Réfutation inédite de Spinoza* [Leibniz 1854]).[8] Leibniz also discussed the debates between Spaeth and Wachter in the *Essais de théodicée* of 1710 and acknowledged the validity of Wachter's approach when noting that 'Spinoza … was well-versed in the Kabbalah of his nation' (Leibniz 1875–90: 6:55 and 6:336). These brief remarks in the *Essais de théodicée* are noteworthy because the book figures among the most widely read philosophical texts in the eighteenth century. The German polymath thus contributed in an important way to the diffusion of Wachter's thesis. But he was not the only one. We also find Wachter discussed in Jacques Basnage's *Histoire des Juifs* ([1706–11] 1716), Don Gabriel Alvarez de Toledo y Pellicier's *Historia de la Iglesia y del Mundo* (1713), Jacob Friedrich Reimmann's *Versuch einer Einleitung in die Historie der Theologie insgeheim der Jüdischen Theologie ins besondere* (1717), the English Freemason Andrew Michael Ramsay's *Le Psychomètre* (1735) and *The Philosophical Principles of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1748), André François Boureau-Deslandes's *Histoire critique de la philosophie* ([1737] 1756), Johann Jacob Brucker's *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742–44), and numerous others (Lærke 2008: 925–26).

This all goes to show that, throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, Wachter's books were read, commented upon, and appreciated all over Europe. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Der Spinozismus im Jüdenthumb* and the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* both figure in the inventory of Moses Mendelssohn's personal library, or that Wachter's theses are mentioned numerous times in Mendelssohn's texts (Meyer 1926: 44 and 52, cited in Altman 1973: 866 n. 10).[9] In *Morgenstunden*, he notes how 'Wachter, in a peculiar treatise, has indicated that this opinion has its origin in cabbalistic fanaticism and is entirely constructed upon it,' here adding a reference to the *Spinozismus im Judenthumb* (Mendelssohn 2011: 75). Moreover, he explicitly endorsed Wachter's general thesis when affirming, in a 1783 letter to Elise Reimarus, that 'Spinozism is built on a Kabbalistic basis and has grown from a Kabbalistic trunk' (Mendelssohn 1972–: 8:264).

5 For studies of Wachter's Spinoza reading, see Scholem (1984), Schröder (1987; 1994), Popkin (1992: 516–19), Israel (2001: 645–52), Mulsow (2005), Vassányi (2011), Wulf (2012: 99–108), Schmidt-Biggemann (2013: 214–42), Beltran (2016: 97–104), Morgan (2018: 573–75).

6 Toland (1704: Preface, sect. 14). Toland speaks of an 'excessive admirer of Spinoza, one wholly addicted to his principles, and reputed the best of any to understand his System.' For the identification of this 'admirer' as Wachter and a reading of the complex relations between Leibniz, Toland, Wachter and Spinoza, see Dagron (2009: 131–239).

7 Apart from the two books on Spinoza and the Kabbalah, Leibniz also read Wachter's *Origines juris naturalis* of 1704. On Leibniz, Spinoza, and Wachter, see Lærke (2008: 923–72), Morfino (2014), Lærke (2015: 335–86), Lærke (2016), Lærke (2017).

8 For a critical edition of the original text, see Leibniz (2002); a partial English translation can be found in in Leibniz (1989: 272–81).

9 In a recent study of Mendelssohn's engagement with Spinozism whose stated ambition is to go 'back to the author's published sources,' Detlev Pätzold mentions the presence of Wachter's books in Mendelssohn's library but makes little of that fact. See Pätzold (2011: 109–10). See also Schröder (1987: 104 n. 371).

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

Important for our purposes, however, Wachter's association of Spinoza and Kabbalah features not only in these various texts from the mid-1780s but appears already three decades earlier in 1755 when Mendelssohn wrote the *Philosophische Gespräche*. Micah Gottlieb thus highlights an interesting recollection regarding Mendelssohn's attitude toward Kabbalah narrated by Mendelssohn's friend Friedrich Nicolai in his 1799 autobiographical *Über meine gelehrte Bildung*:

> I heard from Mendelssohn his excellent ideas concerning the kabbalistic philosophy of the Hebrews. … my friend demonstrated very clearly how Spinoza, also a Jew, by combining the kabbalistic philosophy he inherited as a youth with the propositions of Descartes, must have naturally come to represent God to himself as the unique and all-encompassing substance of which the world was only a modification. (Nicolai 1799: 43–44, trans. in Gottlieb 2011: 95, from Meyer 1967: 113)

Nicolai does not date this recollection specifically. But only a few pages earlier he explains that he first became acquainted with Mendelssohn late 1754 or early 1755, via Lessing (Nicolai 1799: 41). And he relates their conversation about Kabbalah immediately before offering an account of some meetings in coffee houses that took place in 1755 (Nicolai 1799: 44). So presumably the conversation took place around that time—that is to say, exactly at the time when Mendelssohn published the *Philosophicshe Gespräche*! Evidently, the association of Spinoza and Kabbalah was already on his mind at that point.

Mendelssohn's most important interlocutors and many contemporary philosophers, including Lessing, Jacobi, Herder, Hamann, Kant, Schlegel and others, were also familiar with Wachter. For example, when Jacobi in *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* proclaimed Kabbalah to be nothing but 'underdeveloped Spinozism,' he explicitly referred to Wachter's *Elucidarius cabalisticus*.[10] Wachter's theses also inspired strong reactions. Writing to Jacobi in April 1787, Hamann denounced the *Elucidarius* as a 'disgusting book' (*ein eckles Buch*) (Hamann 1955–79: 7:169). And when Herder prepared the second edition of *Gott: Einige Gespräche*, published in 1800, he thought it worthwhile to dedicate several pages to refuting Wachter's at that point century-old interpretation (Herder 1940: 155–56 and 208–9). If the philosophical and theological merits of Wachter's Kabbalistico-Spinozist doctrine were evaluated very differently by the German philosophers, they almost unanimously granted that Wachter's approach was pertinent. To my knowledge, only Herder contested the association of Spinozism and Kabbalah (Herder 1940: 208–9).

In spite of all this, Wachter's contribution to Spinoza interpretation in Germany has been generally minimized, rejected, or even disdained. David Bell, for example, gives the following negative assessment of *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb* in the context of a generally unfavorable evaluation of the early Spinoza commentators:

> The most extreme instance of this crass distortion of Spinoza occurs in J. G. Wachter's *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb, oder, die von dem heutigen Jüdenthumb, und dessen Geheimen Kabbala Vergötterte Welt* (1699), which seeks to demonstrate the dependence of Spinoza on the Kabbala and to expose the absurdity of their identification of God and nature. The work deserves to be quoted at length, since it so admirably illustrates the fantastically inaccurate picture of Spinoza created at the time. … As a refutation of Spinoza this is absurd. It presents a morally objectionable picture that is wholly emotive and designed to shock; it shows not the least sign of comprehension of Spinoza, nor even an attempt to come to terms with his meaning. (Bell 1984: 5; see also Schröder 1994: 34; Vassányi 2011: 226–30)

The criticism is extraordinarily virulent. It is a good illustration of the curious exorcism that Wachter has been the victim of in some commentaries on German Enlightenment philosophy.

10 Jacobi (1994: 233–34): '[i] Spinozism is atheism. [ii] The philosophy of the cabbala, or so much of it as is available to research, and in accordance with its best commentators, von Helmont the younger and Wachter, is, as philosophy, nothing but undeveloped or newly confused Spinozism.' The passage includes a reference by Jacobi to '*Elucidarius Cabalisticus, sive Reconditae Hebraeorum Philosophies Brevis & Succincta Recensio*. Epitomatore Job. Georgio Wachtero. Romae, 1706.'

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For Bell, Wachter's contribution was only negative: his books served only to mutilate Spinoza's system. When not derided in this way, Wachter is most often simply ignored.[11] Even the foremost expert on Wachter's work, Winfried Schröder, rejects the idea that Wachter played any significant role in shaping the German *Spinozabild* during the Pantheism Controversy (Schröder 1987: 114–15).

I believe, however, that we should grant Wachter a more prominent place. I do not deny that his work represents a very peculiar version of Spinoza's doctrine, a transformation of Spinozism in which Spinoza would most likely find it hard to recognize himself. After all, Spinoza mentions Kabbalah only once in his entire work and here only to discard it as 'trifles' and 'madness' (Spinoza 1985–2015: 2:217). That did however not prevent Wachter's Kabbalist reading from heralding a transformation in the perception of Spinoza that became crucial for the reception in Germany during the next century. For he proposed a reading in which Spinoza did not, as it was most commonly argued in Wachter's own time, tend toward materialism and atheism, but rather toward idealism (i.e., the doctrine that all that is, is ultimately ideal) and acosmism (i.e., the doctrine that the world ultimately does not exist). For he attributed to Spinoza the view that all that is, is ultimately God, and that God is a purely spiritual being. This is already apparent from the subtitle of *Der Spinozismus im Jüdenthumb*: 'On contemporary Judaism and the deified world of its secret Kabbalah.' The more difficult question is, however, how Wachter's reading, in more or less dissimulated form, found its way into the more mainstream philosophical discussions of Spinoza and how it impacted them. And in order to gain clarity on this point, I think we must turn to Wachter's second book, the *Elucidarius cabalisticus*, and to the way it compares with Moses Mendelssohn's 1755 *Philosophische Gespräche*.

3. MENDELSSOHN'S SECOND DIALOGUE

Let us begin with the *Philosophische Gespräche*. In the first two dialogues, Mendelssohn discusses Leibniz, Spinoza and the relationship between their doctrines. Mendelssohn's aim is to present Spinozism as a respectable position by assimilating it to Leibnizianism or, to be more precise, by assimilating it to what is sometimes called Leibnizio-Wolffianism.

In the first dialogue, Mendelssohn suggests that Spinoza provided the blueprint for Leibniz's 'pre-established harmony,' understood by Mendelssohn as the doctrine of the relations between the mind and the body put forward by Leibniz in the 1695 *Système nouveau de la nature et de la communication des substances*. According to that doctrine, 'God has originally created the soul, and every other real unity, in such a way that everything in it must arise from its own nature by a perfect spontaneity with regard to itself, yet by a perfect conformity to things without' (Leibniz 1985: 457).[12] Mendelssohn correlates it with proposition VII of the second part of Spinoza's *Ethics*, according to which 'the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:451).

11 See for example Beiser (1987), Zammito (1997), and Tavaillot (2008) on the role of Spinoza in eighteenth-century German philosophy. None of them as much as mention Wachter. Arkush (1994) contains a lengthy chapter on Mendelssohn and Spinoza, but does not mention Wachter at any time. Förster and Melamed (2012), dedicated to the later reception of Spinoza in Germany, does not mention Wachter either. A notable exception is Micah Gottlieb who acknowledges in a note that 'Wachter's books were of central importance in shaping the perception of Spinoza in eighteenth-century Germany' (Gottlieb 2011: 169 n. 107).

12 In the *Système nouveau*, Leibniz calls it a 'hypothesis of agreement', not 'pre-established harmony' (Leibniz 1985: 457). In the 1702 *Considérations sur la doctrine d'un esprit universal unique*, Leibniz rather proclaims to have shown 'a perfect parallelism between what happens in the soul and what takes place in matter' (Leibniz 1985: 457). It is only in a brief later explanation of the *Système Nouveau*, in a letter to Basnage de Beauval, that Leibniz adopts the term 'pre-established harmony' for the doctrine according to which 'God had made each of the two substances from the beginning in such a way that though each follows only its own laws which it has received with its being, each agrees throughout with the other' (Leibniz 1985: 457). It is worth noting that, in this text, Leibniz understands by 'pre-established harmony' the relations that individual substances entertain among each other. But all individual substances are, for Leibniz, minds or mind-like. So, in this context, there is not question of a harmony between the mind and the body, but among minds or mind-like substances. The more direct association of pre-established harmony to the mind-body union first appears in Pierre Bayle's article 'Rorarius' on the *Système nouveau* in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (in the second edition of 1702). Leibniz subsequently adopted this usage himself, speaking for example in the preface of the *Essais de théodicée* of 'my system of pre-established harmony between the soul and the body.'

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The analysis is not original. It was first proposed by the Cartesian Ruardus Andala in his *Dissertationum philosophicarum pentas* from 1712 in an attempt to counter Leibniz's repeated accusations that Cartesianism inevitably leads to Spinozism by turning Leibniz's weapon against himself, arguing that Spinoza's doctrine was *primus parens harmoniae praestabilitae* (Andala 1712).[13] The Halle pietist Joachim Lange revived Andala's claim in his *Causa Dei et religionis naturalis adversum atheismum* ([1723] 1727), this time in an attempt to compromise the Leibniz-inspired philosophy of Christian Wolff with a suspicion of Spinozism (Lærke 2008: 48–50; Pätzold 2011: 112–16). Mendelssohn, however, in line with his general approach, used the same analysis for the contrary purpose, namely to rehabilitate Spinoza by pointing to the proximity to Leibniz who, in the meantime, had become firmly established as a respectable philosopher in Germany. Wachter, as far as I can judge, plays no role in this debate about the origins of pre-established harmony.

In the second dialogue, the one I am primarily interested in here, Mendelssohn enquires about the status of the world in Spinoza and the relation between this Spinozist conception and Leibniz's conception of the world. Now, according to Leibniz's theory in the *Essais de théodicée* (1710), God chooses the best of all possible worlds. Before creating the world, God conceives in his intellect infinitely many possible worlds which he then compares with respect to perfection. Between these possible worlds, he chooses only one, the best, and by his will, coextensive with his power, he brings this best world into existence. This world willed by God is the unique world in which we actually live. The phenomenal reality of this actually existing, chosen world consists in the fact that the series of events it includes is expressed or perceived by infinitely many individual created substances or 'monads', whose inner substantial activity consists in spontaneous perception. For Leibniz, however, the possible worlds *qua* possible also have a kind of existence, namely, precisely, a *possible* existence that Leibniz also describes as an *ideal* existence. This ideal existence is grounded in the fact that the possible worlds are contained and expressed essentially in the divine intellect as eternal truths and thus perceived by God. As Leibniz puts it in the *Monadology*, §§ 43–44:

> It is also true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that, or the source of that which is real in possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend; without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible. … For if there is reality in essences or possibles, or indeed, in eternal truths, this reality must be grounded in something existent and actual, and consequently, it must be grounded in the existence of the necessary being, in whom essence involves existence, that is, in whom possible being is sufficient for actual being. (Leibniz 1875–90: 6:614, trans. Leibniz 1989: 218; see also *Essais de théodicée*, §184 and §189, in Leibniz 1875–90: 6:226–27 and 229)

In the *Philosophische Gespräche*, Mendelssohn reformulates this famous theory by suggesting that, for Leibniz, there is an *Urbild* and a *Nachbild* of the world, or what we might translate as an 'original image' and a 'derived image'.[14] The *Urbild* is a detailed plan of the world insofar as it is represented in God's intellect as one possible creation among other possible creations, all equally conceived in God's intellect. The *Nachbild* of the world is the actual, existent world, insofar as it is realized in the perception of infinitely many individual created substances or monads created by God. In order for the world as *Urbild* to enter existence, there must be a 'complement to possibility' as Mendelssohn puts it with a notion originally coined by Christian Wolff to define existence in his *Philosophia prima, sive Ontologia* (See Wolff 1736: 143).

13 On Leibniz's accusations against the Cartesians, see Lærke (2008: 857–921), Lærke (2013b: 281–97), Lærke (2013a: 13–42).

14 It is notoriously difficult to translate Mendelssohn's use of German terms involving the word 'Bild' ('Urbild', 'Nachbild', 'Abbild', 'Vorbild', etc.). 'Urbild' and 'Nachbild' are sometimes translated as 'archetype' and 'replica') (Dahlstrom in Mendelssohn 1997), sometimes by 'prototype' and 'reproduction' (Dahlstrom and Dyck in Mendelssohn 2011). I have here generally maintained the German terms, but I think 'original image' and 'derived image', while admittedly being a bit flatfooted as translations, remain fairly close to the original in their literal meaning, maintain the alliteration intended, and come with less unwarranted connotative baggage.

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

Mendelssohn, however, does not refer to the *Ontologia* when accounting for this theory in the *Philosophische Gespräche*. Instead, he leans on a passage in Wolff's *Theologia Naturalis*, II, § 92, where the latter maintains that 'God delimits all the possible modes of the primary possibilities and, at the same time, he knows those limits very distinctly' (Wolff 1741: 62). And the way that Mendelssohn paraphrases this particular passage is not without interest in the context of Kabbalah. He writes that, according to Wolff, 'God entertained the possibility of contingent things since he could think of his own perfections next to a certain degree of limitation [*einem gewissen Grade der Einschränkung*]' (Mendelssohn 1972–: 1:16, trans. in Mendelssohn 1997: 109). I shall not attempt to unpack the exact implications of this mysterious statement—it is not relevant to the main concern of this paper. But we should note how Mendelssohn transforms Wolff's modal discussion of primary possibilities into a discussion of divine 'perfections' and 'degrees'—notions that have a distinctly more ontological ring to them than Wolff's original analysis, especially given the Spinozist and Leibnizian contexts of Mendelssohn's overall philosophical development.[15] For, on those ontological terms—and without claiming to propose anything more than an intriguing conjecture—the underlying doctrine begins to sound conspicuously like the doctrine of *tsimtsum*, i.e., the conception of divine self-limitation or self-contraction that governs the creation story in the Lurianic Kabbalah, a conception that stood centrally in the doctrines of practically all the Kabbalists of Christian extraction, including Wachter (Wachter 1706: 31–32; Wachter 1699: 84–88).[16] It would, of course, be frivolous to trace Mendelssohn's talk of 'Einschränkung' back to any Kabbalist in particular, including Wachter. The Lurianic doctrine was common knowledge and Mendelssohn could have learned it from any number of writers. Moreover, in the 1699 *Spinozismus im Judenthumb*, Wachter himself translates *contractio infiniti*—a standard Latin rendering of the Hebrew *tsimtsum*—quite differently, namely as 'Zusammenziehung des Unendlichen' (Wachter 1699: 85–86). Still, leaving to one side the question of exact sources, and addressing the terminological point alone, it is worth mentioning that 'Einschränkung' was the preferred translation by other, slightly later, German thinkers when working in the same cross-field between philosophy and Kabbalah. In both Salomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte* and in Hegel's *Vorlesungen* über *die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 'Einschränking' is the German term employed to translate 'tsimtsum'.[17] And even though no decisive evidence exists, I think it not unlikely that Mendelssohn, too, had the Lurianic Kabbalah in mind when he reformulated Wolff as he did.

Be that as it may, one may wonder what all this has to do with Spinoza. Now, Mendelssohn's general approach to Spinoza consists in arguing that Leibniz found 'the form under which Spinoza's system can exist with reason and religion' (Mendelssohn 1997: 108). In order to obtain this result with regard to Spinoza's modal philosophy, he uses the distinction between *Urbild* and *Nachbild* to argue that the necessary world described by Spinoza in the *Ethics* represents, so to speak, half of Leibniz's doctrine of the best possible world. According to a standard reading of Spinoza at the time which should probably be traced back to Leibniz, Spinoza's world of necessity

15 For Spinoza, see *Ethics*, I, prop. 11, scol. (Spinoza 1985–2015): 419: 'Perfection does not take away the existence of a thing, but on the contrary asserts it.' Given that Spinoza moreover identifies 'reality' and 'perfection', an implicit conception of degrees of perfection is introduced in Ethics I, prop. 9 (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:416): 'The more reality or being each thing has, the more attributes belong to it.' It is explicitly used in *Ethics*, I, Appendix, in Spinoza (1985–2015: 1:446). Leibniz consistently defines perfection as degree of reality in texts too many to reference, from the letters to Eckhardt in the late 1670s to the 1714 *Monadology* (see Lærke 2008: 799–801). For Mendelssohn's own conception of metaphysical perfection and degrees of such perfection, see *Rhapsody or Additions to the Letters on Sentiments*, in Mendelssohn (1997: 154): 'The essence of God consists in perfection;it is the plan of creation, the source of all natural and supernatural events'; and *On the Sublime and Naive in the Fine Sciences*, in Mendelssohn (1997: 195): 'each thing that is or appears immense as far as the degree of its perfection is concerned is called sublime. God is called "the most sublime being".'

16 See also the passage from Thomas Burnett's *Archeologia philosophiae* quoted in Wacther (1706: 27), which takes up the doctrine of *tsimtsum* as *retractio*. For texts particularly relevant to Wachter's understanding of the doctrine, see Cohen de Herrera (1677) and [Knorr von Rosenroth or Van Helmont?] (1684). For some commentary, see Altman (1982: 317–55, esp. 331–55), Beltran (2016: 170–82).

17 See Maimon (2018: 58): 'The Kabbalah is, in fact, nothing other than an extension of Spinozism, which explains not only the genesis of the world through the restriction [*Einschränkung*] of the Divine Being, but also traces the genesis of every kind of being, and the relation of each to the others back to a particular property of God.' And Hegel (1979: 427): 'Die damit zusammenhängende Emanation ist Wirkung aus der ersten Ursache, durch Einschränkung jenes ersten Unendlichen; sie ist Grenze (horos) des Ersten.' On these texts, see also Wolfson (1934: 394–95), and, more recently the excellent Melamed (2004; 2012; 2021).

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

is a world in which everything possible has been, is, or becomes, actual (see, e.g., Leibniz 1875–90: 2:562–63; Lærke 2018). And indeed, possibility is not for Spinoza an ontological category of its own, but only a particular way for a finite mind to ignore the causes that always, in reality, determine the existence or non-existence of a thing: 'a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge. … So we call it contingent or possible' (Spinoza 1986–2015: 1:436 and 546). For Spinoza, then, and contrary to Leibniz, there is no real ontological difference between possibility and real existence: what is conceived as possible by an infinite intellect is identical to what exists. Consequently, Mendelssohn then claims, the way that Spinoza conceives of the actual, real world is comparable to the ideal *Urbild* of all the possible worlds conceived by God according to Leibniz. Spinoza proceeds as if the *Urbild* of all the possible worlds was already the existent, actual world, without there being any need for a 'complement of possibility'. The world is never created outside of God as *Nachbild* since, for Spinoza, it already exists fully insofar as it is conceived in God's intellect, as an *Urbild* prior to any divine decree or act of will, *antecedenter ad decretum*:

> You know, the Leibnizians attribute to the world a twofold existence, as it were. It existed, to use their language, among possible worlds in the divine intellect prior to the divine decree. Because it is the best, God preferred it over all possible worlds and allowed it to actually exist outside him. Now, Spinoza remained at that first stage of existence. He believed that a world never became actual outside God and all visible things were not subsisting for themselves, up to this hour, outside God, but instead were still and always to be found in the divine intellect alone. … The world of Spinoza, we have seen, is an ideal world; it is what, according to Leibniz's system, the original image [*Urbild*] for this world was before the decree. (Mendelssohn 1997: 108–9; translation modified)

In this way, Mendelssohn contends, by explicating the relation that Spinoza's doctrine entertains with Leibniz's, we will better perceive 'the side of Spinoza's system that borders on the truth' (Mendelssohn 1997: 109). The analysis is quite astute. It caters nicely both for Leibniz's possibilist modal philosophy and for Spinoza's rejection of possibility as an ontological category distinct from the necessary and the real. What does not sound very Spinozist, however, in particular at a time when Spinoza was routinely assimilated to atheism and materialism, is the idea that 'the world of Spinoza … is an ideal world,' existing only in God's intellect. And yet, Mendelssohn's assimilation of Spinozism to Leibnizianism on this point has as its *basic condition* that one does not consider Spinoza to be an atheist and a materialist, but rather to be someone engaged in a vast 'deification of the world,' to use Wachter's expression.

Is it possible to read Spinoza's text in this way? One obvious objection would be to point to *Ethics*, part II, prop. 2, according to which 'extension is an attribute of God, or God is an extended thing' (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:449). How can a philosopher who declares God or Nature an 'extended thing' be adequately construed as an 'idealist'? There is only one possible solution to this interpretive problem: One must conceive of Spinoza's attribute of extension in such a way that it somehow reduces to the ideal, or in such a way that the extra-cogitative and real distinction between the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension is somehow re-conceptualized as an intra-cogitative and conceptual distinction established within the domain of ideas constituting God's thought and intellect.[18] Mendelssohn does not address this question in the *Philosophische Gespräche*. We do, however, find elements of a solution of this kind in a 1763 letter from Mendelssohn to Lessing.

Let us first set the scene. In the short 1763 text entitled *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen*, Lessing objected to Mendelssohn's thesis in the first dialogue, regarding the Spinozist origins of Leibniz's thesis of pre-established harmony between body and soul. Lessing considered Mendelssohn's comparison 'sophistical' because, says Lessing, on closer inspection, Spinoza's doctrine of body and soul has only little in common with Leibniz's pre-established harmony. After all, Lessing argued, in Spinoza we are not dealing with a

18 I borrow the distinction between intra- and extra-cogitative parallelism from Gueroult (1974: 15–16).

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

correspondence between body and soul but with an identity. What Spinoza intended to say in the *Ethics* was that

> the order and connection of the concepts in the soul correspond to the order and connection of the bodies simply because the body is the object of the soul; for the soul is nothing but the body as it thinks itself and the body nothing but the extended soul (Lessing 1970–79: 8:518; I translate; cf. Spinoza 1986–2015: I, 451).

In another text from 1763, the *Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott*, Lessing took more direct aim at Mendelssohn's second dialogue, objecting that he, for his part, could 'form no concept of a reality outside God' and that any doctrine affirming that things exists as a created *Nachbild* outside of God, such as Mendelssohn's depiction of Leibniz, involved a 'reduplication of the *Urbild* that was both unnecessary and extravagant' (Lessing 1970–79: 8:515–16).

Mendelssohn's replies to these objections in *Morgenstunden* from 1785 and in *An die Freunde Lessings* from 1786 are well-known.[19] But let us turn to an earlier letter from 1763, written by Mendelssohn to Lessing while the latter was still alive. Here, Mendelssohn offers a phenomenalist analysis of Spinoza that aims at providing a more sophisticated account of Spinoza's doctrine, taking into account Lessing's insights. Mendelssohn thus agrees that, for Spinoza, the body is nothing but the object of the soul and that, for this reason, the soul is united with its body in the same way as the soul is united with its own representations:

> According to [Spinoza], the ideas and representations are but the changes of the simple things *as they are*, and the motions are but the changes of the simple things *as they appear*. The same modifications of single things, constitute thought when considered as realities, and extension and motion when considered as phenomena. Since the soul has representations of the world (or of all changes in the simple things) following the position of its body in it (which means for Spinoza: since the body is the object of the soul, and the body itself is but the totality of changes occurring in certain simple things and perceived by me as phenomena), the series of phenomena must harmonize with the series of realities, i.e. the motions of the body must harmonize with the ideas in the soul. (Mendelssohn 1844: 5:174)[20]

We here get a much better sense of how Mendelssohn constructs his idealist Spinoza. In response to Lessing's allegation of sophism, he defends exactly the kind of phenomenalization of Spinoza's notion of body that will also allow him to reduce the distinction between attributes of thought and extension to a distinction within thought itself. Once this has been established, nothing prevents arguing that all the modifications of all the attributes, including those of extension, together form a purely 'ideal' world, or that they constitute something comparable to the ideal *Urbild* of the world given in God's intellect before the act of creation according to Leibniz.

What should we think of this interpretation of Spinoza? If we follow Alexander Altman's classic commentary on the *Philosophishe Gespräche*, it is simply wrong, to the point where he declares it 'hard to see Mendelssohn's justification for trying to approximate the two thinkers' (Altmann 1966: 19). David Bell and Sylvain Zac describe it as 'demonstrably inaccurate,' 'erroneous,' 'incorrect,' even 'imaginary' (Zac 1989: 54–62, 89; Bell 1984: 26). Along similar lines, in a recent study, Detlev Pätzold notes that 'this is a strange interpretation, indeed, with no support in Spinoza's texts, nor is there any hint of a proper understanding of his view' (Pätzold 2011: 118). This may be true from a strictly Spinozist viewpoint although, I must admit, I do not consider the interpretation to be quite

19 Mendelssohn responds in more detail to *Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott* in the 1785 *Morgenstunden*, where he examines what he terms Lessing's 'purified pantheism', according to which things do not exist outside God—a doctrine that Mendelssohn rejects while still insisting that it is distinct from Spinozism in order to disprove Jacobi's famous report regarding Lessing's alleged Spinozism. On Mendelssohn's reply to *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen* in *An die Freunde Lessings* from 1786, see Pätzold (2011: 119–21).

20 See also Zac (1989: 62–63). Jacobi repeats the analysis: 'Beide Philosophen betrachteten Seele und Leibniz als ein unum per se, welscher zwar in der Vorstellung, keinesweges aber in der Wirklichkeit getheilt werden könne' (Jacobi 1812: 4.2:113).

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

that outrageous. It is, however, not at all clear to me that this is a good way to conclude on the matter. First, even if Mendelssohn's take on Spinoza cannot pass for an acceptable interpretation today, it still is an interpretation that at some point in history was in fact considered perfectly acceptable, for it was clearly deemed so in eighteenth-century Germany. Even those readers of Mendelssohn, like Lessing, who disagreed, did not proclaim the reading impossible, outrageous, or disingenuous in terms comparable to those employed by present-day commentators. Next, it must be stressed that none of the protagonists in these debates nurtured any ambition about providing historically exact accounts of Spinoza's original intentions. They were appropriating Spinozism for their own ends, trying to search out what they sometimes called 'the spirit of Spinoza' which was something quite different from Spinoza himself. In *Gott: Einige Gespräche*, trying to capture this spirit, Herder even went as far as to claim that Spinoza 'did not recognize the integral strength of his own system' (Herder 1940: 123). This given, challenging the exactitude of Mendelssohn's understanding of Spinozism only makes historical sense if it serves the purpose of subsequently inquiring into the reasons *why* it was so far removed from Spinoza's own Spinozism, so to speak. In other words, we must inquire into the transformations in the intellectual landscape that made a reading of Spinoza such as Mendelssohn's palatable in 1755.

It is in this respect that I think Johann Georg Wachter's contribution to the history of Spinozism becomes relevant. As we shall see in the next section, it offers an interpretive framework known by most of our German protagonists within which an idealist reading of Spinoza already began to take shape. By contrast, the two other interpretations of Spinoza which otherwise contributed the most the formation of the *Spinozabild* among German philosophers in the mid-eighteenth century, namely those of Pierre Bayle and Christian Wolff, do not really provide the interpretive resources to explain the idealist direction in which Mendelssohn took Spinoza's doctrine. In the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702 edition) Bayle proclaimed Spinoza 'the first to reduce atheism to a system.' He identifies Spinoza's views with those of the Ancient philosopher Strato whom Bayle, following Seneca, described as a thinker diametrically opposed to Plato, because 'the one [Plato] deprived God of a body, while the other [Strato] deprived him of the soul' (Bayle 1820: 13:421–23). Given that Spinoza did not admit 'a real distinction between God and extension generally,' Bayle argued, he was 'obliged to recognize that extension and God are the same thing' (Bayle 1820: 13:439). Consequently, his system 'reduces [God] the condition of matter, the basest of all beings' (Bayle 1820: 13:440). It is very hard indeed to conceive of an idealist Spinoza under that interpretation! As for Wolff, his most important analyses of Spinoza figure in the 1723 (1724 on the title page) *De Differentia nexus rerum sapientis et fatalis necessitatis*—a text mainly focused on denouncing Spinoza as a fatalist—and in his *Theologia naturalis*, sect. II, chap. IV, sect. 671–716 ([1737] 1741). But neither of those texts suggests that Wolff considered construing Spinoza as an idealist. Instead, in the *Theologia naturalis*, he echoes Bayle's judgement when noting that 'the *Ethics* of Spinoza is a unique system of atheism' (Wolff 1741: 730). And he chastises Spinoza for having depicted extension 'as real,' himself claiming, *against Spinoza*, that 'extension is an appearance, not a reality' (Wolff 1741: 695). These are not analyses that can serve to depict Spinoza as an idealist who somehow reduces extension to thought. Moreover, in the *Differentia*, Wolff rejects what he sees as Spinoza's voluntarism, arguing that, *contrary* to what he takes to be Spinoza's view, 'the essences of things are conceived in the divine intellect before the decree' (Wolff 1724: 21). But Mendelssohn's idealist reading of Spinoza in the *Philosophische Gespräche* is entirely predicated on the notion that Spinoza's world in fact just *is* what is conceived in the divine intellect before the decree. Wolff thus flatly denies that Spinoza holds the view attributed to him by Mendelssohn: the one, Wolff, claims that, for Spinoza, there is no world *antecedenter ad decretum*; the other, Mendelssohn, claims that, in Spinoza, the world *antecedenter ad decretum* is the only one there is! In sum, Wolff's texts, as Bayle's, provide little or no opening for depicting Spinoza as an idealist.[21] We will have to look elsewhere if we are to identify a possible source for Mendelssohn's novel approach. And given his standing in Mendelssohn and in Mendelssohn's intellectual context, Wachter clearly presents himself as an attractive candidate.

21 For this brief survey of Wolff's Spinoza reading, I have learned much from Morrison (1993: 405–20).

4. WACHTER ON SPIRITUAL EXTENSION

Let us now consider in more detail how Wachter assimilates Spinoza and Kabbalah in the *Elucidarius*. Wachter offers two principal arguments.

The first is the one most often highlighted in the commentaries, beginning with Johann Jacob Brucker's critique of Wachter in the *Historia critica philosophiae*: Wachter transforms Spinoza into a Neo-Platonist by rephrasing Spinoza's notion of 'immanence' in terms of Neo-Platonist 'emanation' and, correlatively, by translating the notion of 'affect' into that of 'effect'. These two basic interpretive operations will subsequently allow Wachter to claim that, for Spinoza, 'modifications' of God are not properties of God, but consequences or effects that emanate from God (Brucker 1742–44: vol. 4–2, 695 n. f). By means of these maneuvers, Wachter is attempting to acquit Spinoza of the accusation of pantheism[22] by creating greater ontological distance between God and the created world while still shunning the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (Wachter 1706: 53–55).[23] If, however, as most commentators do, one approaches Wachter's book exclusively from the point of view of this first principal thesis, it is difficult to see how it is relevant to the debates among German philosophers in the second half of the eighteenth century. Mendelssohn, for one, explicitly rejected that Spinoza could be read in that fashion when writing in *Morgenstunden*, alluding to a passage from Saint Paul that Spinoza himself also refers to, that

> we live, move, and exist as the effects of God, but not in him. The Spinozist, by contrast, claims: there is only one *Unique* infinite substance, since a substance must obtain on its own, subsisting for itself, it must require no other being for its existence and thus be independent. (Mendelssohn 2011: 76)[24]

Indeed, as Winfried Schröder notes, generally within these German debates, the main problem was not whether one should acquit Spinoza of irreligious pantheism or not. It was rather whether pantheism, and Spinozism along with it, was in fact irreligious or not (Schröder 1987: 103–4; Wulf 2012: 263–64). Lessing's replies to Mendelssohn in *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen* and in *Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott*, the two texts from 1763 already mentioned, clearly testify to this displacement of the problem regarding Christian orthodoxy and pantheism since Wachter's time. The same goes for the way that Mendelssohn himself approaches the question of Spinozism in *Morgenstunden*.

Wachter did, however, also pursue a second major argumentative strategy the aim of which was to acquit Spinoza of a possible accusation of materialism and to make his theory of the substantial attributes of thought and extension conform to the kind of Neo-Platonist ontology that Wachter, following Henry More, attributed to the Kabbalists.[25] The passage where Wachter develops this argument must be quoted in its entirely, including the footnotes, here in English translation:

> VII. *Fourth sample*. From this principle[26] the Kabbalists draw various conclusions, such as that MATTER cannot be created nor exist from its own base essence. Hence, either there is no matter in the universe, or spirit and matter are or one and the same thing, as it can

22 'Pantheism' is not a term that Wachter employs. It was, however, introduced about the same time as Wachter wrote the *Elucidarius* by an author that he knew personally, namely in Toland (1705).

23 The reading relies on a distinction between the hidden essence of God and the manifest exercise of his power which in turn relies on the Lurianic theory of *tsimtsum*, i.e., the act of God prior to creation where the creator 'contracts' himself so as to open up a primordial space within himself where He can deploy his creative powers. For commentary, see Schröder (1987: 94), Lærke (2008: 942–43), Lærke (2015: 359–60), Lærke (2017).

24 See Acts 17:28: 'For in him we live, and move, and have our being.' Spinoza discusses the verse in Letter 73 to Oldenburg, in Spinoza (1985–2015: 2:467): 'For I maintain that God is, as they say, the immanent, but not the transitive, cause of all things. That all things are in God and move in God, I affirm, I say, with Paul, and perhaps also with all the ancient philosophers, though in another way.'

25 On this point, see the refutation of More in Wachter (1706: 31–32). Wachter is commenting on the anti-Kabbalist text More (1677). Their disagreement mainly concerns the question of *creatio ex nihilo* that the Kabbalists reject and that More, contrary to Wachter, considers essential to Christian religion. But they do agree in thinking that 'nullam igitur materiam esse in rerum natura' is an authentic Kabbalistic axiom. See Lærke (2017) and Lærke (2015: 341–59).

26 In the previous section, where Wachter develops his third example of the agreement between Spinozism and Kabbalah, he explains how the two doctrines both reject as a 'fiction' the principle of *creation quod nihil fiat aliquid*.

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

be seen in the *Kabbalistic Theses* of H. MORE.[27] This all agrees admirably with SPINOZA who denies that *any corporeal or material mass could have been created by GOD as the subject of this world*,[28] and adds as proof that [u] those who disagree ignore (*as he says*) from which divine power it could have been created.

VIII. *Fifth sample*. Yet, contrary to first appearances, he does not concede that some base thing had eternally existed alongside God; nor does he concede that it afterwards became the subject of this world. For, at the same time, he denies that there is matter in God and destroys the existence of matter all-together, but not so that absolutely no matter exists, but only so that MATTER IN THE COMMON SENSE as defined and explicated by its most base nature, does not exist. Hence, he often reminds us that [w] *DESCARTES had defined matter badly by extension,* and [x] *badly explained extension through a base nature, that had to be in a place, finite, divisible etc*., while matter should be explained *by an attribute, which expresses an eternal and infinite essence*. Does it follow from this that God does not consist in matter? Certainly not! But he has clearly denied that it is matter as you see it, and only retained the word, which has been purged of its common meaning. In this context, however, I could have wished for him to be more cautious and secret in his dealings, as is befitting for a Kabbalist, for only few grasp this, while most people, who do not grasp it, make accusations.

IX. *Sixth sample*. According to SPINOZA, there is thus no matter in the universe, but what exists is utterly excellent, or, as the Kabbalists call it, it is SPIRIT. And to understand that with this, SPINOZA refers to the Kabbalists, he explicitly teaches that [y] *no corporeal substance, insofar as it is substance, is divisible*. Consequently, for SPINOZA, the substance of all things is spirit, since everybody understands by an immaterial and indivisible thing a SPIRIT. He himself says this very openly, if we pay attention to what we should constantly keep in mind, namely that [z] *mind and body are one and the same thing, although expressed in two different ways,* and that [aa] *thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same thing, but understood sometimes under the attribute of thought, and sometimes under the attribute of extension*. His appeal to the Hebrews here is remarkable. Indeed, he says that [bb] *Something like this was seen as if through a cloud by the Hebrews who, as is known, maintain that GOD, the intellect of God, and the things understood by this same intellect are one and the same*. And how should we conceive that thought and extension are two attributes of a single substance if thought and extension do not agree in a common nature, that is to say, a SPIRITUAL one? According to SPINOZA, spirit is the substance of all things and thought and extension are the attributes of this spirit, attributes of which the mind and the body are two modes. This is the reason for his twofold objection that Descartes *has not explained matter correctly and that extension is not divisible into parts or composed out of parts*, because on this conception, which is that of the intellect, extension is just as spiritual a thing as thought is.

X. *Seventh sample*. It can then be affirmed more confidently that, according to the philosophy of the Kabbalists, the Entity in which everything exists must be explained by an immaterial and most excellent nature, that is to say, SPIRIT, the attributes of which are infinite immaterial and spiritual thought and extension and therefore that what the common man imagines to be matter has neither been created nor been posited by itself, but involves all sorts of things that are contrary to existence.

27 Wachter alludes to More (1677).

28 This passage, in italics in the text, is not exactly a quotation but rather a kind of paraphrase of an argument found in *Ethics*, I, prop. 15, schol (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:421–24). We note that, contrary to Wachter, Spinoza never uses the term 'subjectum' when speaking of the unique substance. This is also the text Wachter refers to repeatedly in the sixth sample.

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

> [u] *Ethics*, I, prop. 15, scholium.
>
> [w] Letter 73.
>
> [x] *On the emendation of the intellect*, p. 385.[29]
>
> [y] *Ethics*, I, prop. 13, corol., and prop. 15, scholium.
>
> [z] *Ethics*, III, prop. 2, scholium.
>
> [aa] *Ethics*, II, prop. 7, scholium.
>
> [bb] See the passage quoted above. (Wachter 1706: 45–48)

The passage concerns the status of matter and extension in Spinoza's philosophy. Wachter attempts to demonstrate that, in Spinoza, everything that exists is spiritual and that matter is, strictly speaking, nothing. However, in order to circumvent the unequivocal attribution of extension to God in *Ethics*, II, prop. 2, Wachter maintains that, for Spinoza, extension is different from matter and, in reality, just as spiritual as thought. Consequently, for Spinoza, spirit is the substance of all things and thought and extension are two attributes of this spirit. Wachter relies on three texts.

First, he refers to Letter 73 in Spinoza's *Opera posthuma*, that is to say, Letter 83 in most modern editions.[30] This is a letter from Spinoza to Tschirnhaus in which Spinoza claims that Descartes has not explained the nature of matter and extension correctly (Spinoza 1985–2015: 2:487).

Second, he refers to the development that Spinoza proposes in the scholium to *Ethics*, part I, proposition 15. Spinoza here refutes 'the arguments [he find] authors using, to try to show that corporeal substance is unworthy of the divine nature, and cannot pertain to it' (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:422). He explains how 'we conceive of quantity in two ways, abstractly, or superficially, as we imagine it, or as substance, which is done by the intellect alone':

> So if we attend to quantity as it is in the imagination, which we do more often and more easily, it will be found to be finite, divisible, and composed of parts, and conceive of it insofar as it is a substance, which happens with great difficulty, then (as we have already sufficiently demonstrated) it will found to be infinite, unique, and indivisible. … For example, we conceive that water is divided and its parts separated from each other—insofar as it is water, but not insofar as it is corporeal substance. For, insofar as it is substance, it is neither separated nor divided. Again, water, insofar as it is water, is generated and corrupted, but insofar as it is substance, it is neither generated nor corrupted. (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:424)

Wachter uses this reasoning to claim that Spinoza cannot understand by 'extension' what is commonly understood by it, but that he has 'purged [the term] of its common meaning' so that it no longer refers to any of the 'base' properties habitually associated with it, divisibility, corruptibility, etc. His analysis so far is perfectly faithful to Spinoza's revisionary approach to the notion of 'extension' in the scholium to proposition 15 (Lærke 2014a).

Third, and finally, Wachter must explain why this revised, Spinozist conception of extension as a divine attribute necessarily implies that extension must now be considered *spiritual*. To make this argument, he turns to the scholium of *Ethics*, part II, prop. 7, where Spinoza establishes

29 According to Bruder's division into paragraphs (also used by Curley), this is the § 87 of the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:37–38). The quotation is not quite exact. Spinoza says nothing about any 'base nature'. He proposes an example of the 'major mistakes' (magnos errores) that occur when we do not correctly distinguish the intellect from the imagination: 'quod extensio debeat esse in loco, debeat esse finite, cujus partes ab invicem distinguantur realiter, quod sit primum et unicum fundamentum omnium rerum, et uno tempore majus spatium occupet quam alio, multaque ejusmodi alia, quae omnia prorsus oppugnant veritatem, ut suo loco ostendemus.'

30 Letter 73 corresponds to Letter 71 (Spinoza 1677: 597–99). Note that there is a gap in the enumeration of letters in Spinoza (1677). There is no letter 72.

DOI: 10.32881/jomp.150

the principles of his so-called 'parallelism'. In this scholium, Spinoza explains that 'the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance' albeit 'expressed in two ways' (Spinoza 1985–2015: 1:451). Wachter considers this, as many commentators after him, to provide sufficient grounds for thinking that the distinction between the attributes is not a real one, but that one eventually reduces to be an aspect the other—in this case, that extension can be reduced to be an aspect of thought.[31]

On the whole, the interpretation is consistent with the texts by Spinoza that Wachter quotes. Certainly, we must note some terminological ambiguities in the passage from the *Elucidarius* regarding the use of the terms 'extension' and 'matter' which does not always correspond to Spinoza's use. This is because, when reading the passage in context, we realize that Wachter is engaged in a double discussion. On the one hand, as we have seen, he is discussing Spinoza who, according to Wachter, conceives of *extension* as spiritual and immaterial. He is, however, at the same time in the process of situating himself in relation to a refutation of Kabbalah offered by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More in his 1677 *Fundamenta philosophiae sive Cabbalae aëto-paedo-melissaeae*. In this text, More discusses how Kabbalists think about *matter* as a spiritual thing. It is thus not surprising that Wachter's attempt at combining his interpretation of Spinoza with his discussion of More's interpretation of Kabbalah occasions some instability in his vocabulary. However, these terminological details only have marginal importance. Wachter's intentions remain clear. In a nutshell, he argues as follows: First, that Spinoza did not take extension to be the kind of 'base' thing that both Descartes and common people take it to be, i.e., passive, divisible matter; second, that what Spinoza refers to by the term 'extension' implies such 'noble' properties as can only pertain to a spiritual thing, such as indivisibility and infinity. Consequently, what Spinoza understands by the term 'extension', is something that must be just as spiritual as thought.

Wachter's reading did not fall upon deaf ears. It is not unlikely, for example, that Wachter's idealist approach influenced Leibniz after their encounters at the Berlin Court. In his *Considérations sur la doctrine d'un esprit universal unique* from 1702, Leibniz thus suggested proximity between Spinozism and the thesis of an *anima mundi*: 'Spinoza, who recognizes only one single substance, is not far from the doctrine of a single universal spirit' (Leibniz 1985: 554; Lærke 2015: 375–83). We find another early appreciation of Wachter's idealist approach to Spinoza in a text by the English Freemason Andrew Michael Ramsey with the curious name 'Le Psychomètre', published in the *Mémoires des Trévoux* in April 1735. Here, Ramsay argued, explicitly basing himself on Wachter, that 'those who consider Spinoza a gross materialism do not understand it; it is a pure idealism, consummated Malebranchism, and a kind of exaggerated Jansenism, or fallen into destitution' (Ramsay 1735; see also Vernière 1954: 402–7).

However, on the evidence I have presented, I think there is some reason to also include Mendelssohn among these authors who appropriated and reframed Wachter's idealist reading of Spinoza. The spiritualization of the attribute of extension proposed by Wachter is very close to Mendelssohn's idealist reading in the *Philosophische Gespräche*. It is even closer to the further explanations he provided in 1763 when replying to Lessing's *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen*, as analyzed above in section 3 (see also Schröder 1987: 92, and Wulf 2012: 106). Certainly, at the time, proto-idealist readings of Spinoza were emerging from other quarters as well, often based on associations of Spinoza with Nicolas Malebranche. Most importantly, the 1713–14 correspondence between Malebranche and Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan turned on the possible Spinozist implications of Malebranche's conception of 'intelligible extension'.[32] But this correspondence was not published until 1841 and could not have been

31 On this last point, no consensus exists among present-day commentators, although the prevalent view—and indeed my own—would be that Wachter is probably wrong, that Spinoza in fact maintains a real distinction between thought and extension, and that one need not reduce one to the other despite their numerical identity in substance. See in particular *Ethics*, I, prop. 10, schol., in Spinoza (1985–2015: 1:416): 'although two attributes may be conceived to be really distinct (i.e., one may be conceived without the aid of the other), we still cannot infer from that that they constitute two being, or two different substances.'

32 For an English edition of the Malebranche–Dortous de Mairan correspondence, see Grene and Watson (1995). For the doctrine of intelligible extension, see Malebranche (1678: 534–43). On these issues, see also Lærke and Moreau (2021: 420–1).

known by Mendelssohn (Malebranche 1841). By contrast, given the presence of Wachter's work in Mendelssohn's personal library, his confirmed knowledge of the connection between Spinoza and Kabbalah as early as 1755, and his repeated references to that connection and to Wachter himself in later texts as well, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Mendelssohn's approach to Spinoza in the *Philosophische Gespräche* was directly informed by Wachter.

5. CONCLUSION

Johann Georg Wachter was among the first, if not the first, to interpret Spinoza as a Neo-Platonist. At the same time, he proposed a proto-idealist reading of Spinoza very close to the one later found in Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche* and other related texts. Making the connection between these two readings is not historically unwarranted. The most immediate background for his Spinoza reading, namely the interpretations offered by Bayle and Wolff, can provide some explanation of the shape Mendelssohn's understanding of Spinoza generally took, but they will not account for its idealism. I cannot, of course, offer a certain demonstration that Mendelssohn took his cue from Wachter. Absent explicit acknowledgments of debt, determining the sources of *any* philosopher's views is *always* an elusive affair. Still, I think there is quite a lot of circumstantial evidence pulling in that direction. Mendelssohn was familiar with Wachter's work and adopted his general thesis regarding the proximity between Spinoza and Kabbalah. He did so explicitly in the mid-1780s in his correspondence with Elise Reimarus and again in *Morgenstunden*. And if we are to trust the testimony of Friedrich Nicolai—and I see no good reason that we should not—he also did so in 1755 already when writing the *Philosophische Gespräche*. There is considerable biographical room for making reasonable conjectures about Wachter as a significant source for Mendelssohn's reading of Spinoza.

Mendelssohn did not, however, simply draw on Wachter's reading. In another perhaps more diffuse sense, one could also say that his original reading of Spinoza in the *Philosophische Gespräche* had Wachter's work as its historical condition. In his reading, Mendelssohn presupposed the possibility of spiritualizing extension and making the distinction between attribute an intra-cogitative one. This was arguably contrary to Spinoza's own original intentions. It was also contrary to a longstanding tradition of reading Spinoza as a kind of atheist or materialist. Mendelssohn himself offered very little in terms of justifying this controversial idealist premise. And yet, with this reading, Mendelssohn managed to set the tone for much subsequent discussion. Whether they agreed with it or not, Mendelssohn's contemporaries did not dismiss his idealist reading out of hand. And this in itself suggests that someone had already prepared the terrain for such a reading. And what I have proposed here as an intriguing option is that this 'someone' was likely Johann Georg Wachter, whose argument in favor of Spinoza in the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* was thus, in some sense, the mother of all idealist readings of Spinoza.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Lærke, Mogens. 2021. Spinozism, Kabbalism, and Idealism from Johann Georg Wachter to Moses Mendelssohn. *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, 3(1): 3, pp. 1–20. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.150*

Submitted: 21 October 2020
Accepted: 25 March 2021
Published: 19 August 2021