The logical and experiential roots of Spinoza’s mysticism – an answer to Jon Wetlesen

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In his interesting paper, ‘Body awareness as a gateway to eternity: a note on the mysticism of Spinoza and its affinity to Buddhist meditation’ Jon Wetlesen criticizes the interpretation of Spinoza that appeared in a previous paper of mine entitled ‘Logic and experience in Spinoza’s mysticism’. Wetlesen is a very competent Spinoza scholar and the whole circle of international Spinoza scholars is looking forward to his forthcoming book The Sage and the Way. Studies in Spinoza’s Ethics of Freedom. I am glad that so capable a scholar pays attention to this very interesting subject. I have much sympathy for his point of view and I would be glad if I could subscribe to it. As I am not convinced by his arguments, my scholarly consciousness forbids me to do so. In this paper, I shall bring forward my main objections without repeating the arguments of my previous article.

I said that I have sympathy with Wetlesen’s point of view. And why not? Without being a mystic myself, I have great admiration for many mystics in various religions; and again, without being a Spinozist myself, I have great admiration for Spinoza. So, why not combine these two things and interpret Spinoza as a mystical philosopher, as so many competent scholars do? And then a mystical philosopher in the sense that Spinoza had mystical experiences, as Wetlesen tries to prove in his paper? For I do not deny that Spinoza’s philosophy has a mystical structure, but, so far as I can see this mystical structure can be explained without reference to these mystical experiences. At one point Wetlesen misinterprets my intentions in that he says that I take sides with the rationalists. This was not my intention. In the debate between the rationalistic and the mystical interpretation of Spinoza I tried to take a mediating position by defending the thesis that Spinoza’s philosophy has a mystical structure but that this mysticism is not built on mystical experiences but on the use of certain (logical) rules. On one point Wetlesen and I agree, i.e., that the question as to whether Spinoza had mystical experiences depends on how we define the term ‘mystical experience’. I interpreted ‘mysticism’ in a narrow way in ‘that it tries to lead people via various ways to experience

* For a much better understanding see Wetlesen’s paper (pp. 479–94) before Hubbeling’s answer – the editor.

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mystic ecstasy, the *unio mystica* and 'that there are various stages on this way before one reaches one's goal... An interesting feature in the various mystical systems is that they resemble each other in their doctrine of the itinerary of the human soul towards the *unio mystica*.' Of these various stages I gave some examples. Now, if in a certain thinker there is not this clear itinerary towards the *unio mystica*, including some techniques of contemplation, this thinker is not a mystic in my sense. Wetlesen apparently uses a broader concept of mysticism. The disadvantage of this broader concept of mysticism in which views like 'the union which the mind has with the whole of nature' belong, is that practically all religious experience becomes mystical. Then every great religious person is a mystic. Therefore I prefer to distinguish between mystical experience in a strict sense and religious experience that is non-mystical. Many instances of what Wetlesen calls mystical experience, e.g. 'the cognition of the union which the mind has with the whole of nature', 'an intimate cognition of God', 'a highly personal feeling and experience', etc., belong to religious feelings in general and are not typically mystical in the sense in which I use the word. But, of course, I do not want to dispute about words and for the sake of the discussion I am very well prepared to accept a broader sense of mysticism, so that religious experiences that are not stages on the typical way to the *unio mystica* by way of contemplating techniques, are also called mystical. Now, it seems for a moment that the discussion between Wetlesen and me comes down to a dispute about words. But, alas, this is not the case. Wetlesen draws a parallel between Spinoza's philosophy and Buddhist meditation, and this latter kind of philosophy is certainly mystical in the sense in which I use the word mysticism in my original article. And on this point and some others I disagree with Wetlesen.

Before I put forward my objections to Wetlesen's view, it seems as well to indicate some principles of interpretation that have guided me, as the science of interpretation is a difficult one and scholars do not always agree with each other on these principles. 1. The main point is that according to my view we should apply Occam's razor also to the problem of interpretation. That is, we should not presuppose some views or experiences in the author who is to be interpreted, if we can do without them. On the other hand: 2. The set of views and experiences by which we can explain more statements of the author is to be preferred to one by which we can explain less. It is self-evident that there is sometimes tension between principles 1 and 2 and that this causes many difficulties. Another problem is the question as to when we can speak of the influence of an author A on an author B; or, what is more important in our case: When can we say that there is an affinity or common structure between two philosophical (or religious) systems? To answer the last question only: 3. According to my view we may only speak of an affinity or common structure if there is an isomorph between the two systems with respect to their basic or fundamental concepts and views. Of course, here too there is
plenty of opportunity to disagree with each other: What is to be included among ‘fundamental concepts and views’? I think that if Wetlesen and I were to continue our discussion we would finally come to a discussion on the principles of interpretation instead of a discussion of Spinoza!

But be this as it may, I think that I have to bring forward some objections to Wetlesen’s interpretation that makes it impossible for me to accept his view, however much sympathy I have for it. Strangely enough I would be glad if Wetlesen could convince me that I am wrong, but until now he has not. In my presentation of objections I shall restrict myself to what seems to me fundamental. Wetlesen’s paper is rich in content and tempts one to go into various details and not only in a critical way. But this would be beyond the scope of this paper.

My main argument was that we can explain the mystical structure of Spinoza’s philosophy, which I accept, by means of (logical) rules and that therefore using principle 1 of the principles of interpretation mentioned above we do not have to presuppose some mystical experiences on the part of Spinoza. I do not say, however, that Spinoza had no religious and emotional feelings; he was not a walking computer machine, but he did not refer to these feelings in his argumentation and he did not build up his philosophical system on this emotional and religious basis. Wetlesen rightly interprets me by saying:

By way of implication, I suppose that Professor Hubbeling would also hold that in order to reach an adequate understanding of the doctrines of Spinoza, it is sufficient to read his definitions, axioms, postulates, and so forth carefully, and to follow his reasoning as he deduces his propositions. This is sufficient in the sense that it does not require any particular ‘mystical experience’ in order to grasp the meaning of what Spinoza has to say.6

I agree with Wetlesen that in Spinoza the essence of the body (and the mind) is a singular essence.7 Wetlesen says, however, that the three kinds of cognition are all general,8 that therefore the singular essence of the body cannot be known by these three ways of cognition and that therefore we must accept the thesis that this singular essence can be felt and experienced in a highly personal manner, which makes Spinoza’s philosophy congenial to mysticism.9 Now, I do not think it is merely so, that ‘Spinoza’s system as a whole must have the status of an entity of reason,’10 which Wetlesen inferred from his own thesis. This seems to me highly improbable for a man who characterizes his philosophy in a letter to Albert Burgh as true: ‘For I do not pretend to have found the best philosophy, but I know that I understand the true one.’11 Further I cannot accept Wetlesen’s argument that all three kinds of cognition are general and do not lead to the knowledge of the singular essences. Spinoza expressis verbis says that the third kind of knowledge is a ‘rerum
singularium cognitio' (a knowledge of the singular things). Wetlesen tries to escape this conclusion by saying that this is only knowledge of the general essence of singular things. But this distinction is too artificial here. In that case there would be no difference at this point between the second and the third kinds of knowledge, which Spinoza precisely points out in this scholium by calling the second kind of knowledge a 'cognitio universalis' and the third kind a 'cognitio rerum singularium'. Moreover, Wetlesen's reference to 2P40Sch2 does not hold good. Wetlesen says: 'I base this interpretation on 2P40Sch2, where Spinoza introduces the three kinds of cognition as three ways of forming 'universal notions' (notiones universales). Spinoza, however, gives here three ways of forming these notions but calls them first and second kinds of knowledge (he subdivided the first kind into two parts; the first is called vague experience, the other memory and imagination). The third kind of knowledge is clearly distinguished from the others and is not subsumed under the three ways by which to form the notiones universales. This kind of knowledge evidently leads to cognition of the particular essences of things. Also the old Dutch translation, which, as is well known, goes back to an older text, has the same structure as the official Latin text of the Opera posthuma. The reader will, however, not fail to notice that the way in which Wetlesen defends Spinoza's mysticism is highly original, because this is usually done by trying to point out that the third kind of knowledge is a mystical way. Wetlesen, however, follows a different path. He first tries to show that none of the usual kinds of knowledge leads to the cognition of the particular essence of one's own body (in which Wetlesen, as we saw, is incorrect) and then he proceeds that in that case there must be another way of knowledge of this particular essence of one own's body, the mystical way, for which he quotes to text of 5P23Sch: 'Nevertheless, we feel and experience (sentimus, experimurque) that we are eternal...'. When Wetlesen, in a first oral discussion with me, referred to this text, I was much impressed. But on further consideration I do not believe that it substantiates Wetlesen's position. Let us look at the context in which the text stands. Spinoza starts by saying: 'This idea which expresses the essence of the body under the form of eternity is, as we have said, a certain mode of thinking which belongs to the essence of the mind, and is necessarily eternal.' And now Spinoza starts a discussion with those people who say: Why do we not know it directly but need a long series of proofs in order to know this eternalness of the mind? Spinoza admits this: 'Yet it is impossible, that we should remember that we existed before the body, because there are no traces of any such existence in the body, and also because eternity cannot be defined by time or have any relationship to it.' But somehow we know that it is true that the mind is eternal, and in this connection Spinoza says: 'Nevertheless, we feel and experience that we are eternal' (Nam nihilominus sentimus, experimurque, nos aeternos esse). But how must we interpret this 'sentimus' and 'experimur'?
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Spinoza gives the answer immediately, for he continues: 'For the mind feels those things that it conceives by understanding, no less than those things that it remembers' (Nam Mens non minus res illas sentit, quas intelligendo concepit, quam quas in memoria habet), i.e., what the mind understands is no less lively before it than what it remembers by means of the memory. 'For...' and now a very important sentence comes: 'For the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things, are precisely the proofs' (Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt, observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes). The seeing, feeling, experience of the mind are nothing else than proofs and demonstrations and thus nothing else than logical activities. So, I am very sorry, we are back again with Hubbeling's logical rules, and not with Wetlesen's mystical experiences! With 'sentimus' Spinoza apparently does not want to introduce a new kind of knowledge that he has not introduced before, i.e., the mystical kind, but simply the well-known way of proofs he used before. 'Sentire' in Spinoza sometimes has the meaning of 'to think, to have the opinion'. As a cognitive activity it is mostly used for the act of observing things, but sometimes it is used for the second (and third way?) of knowledge. Even if we interpret 'sentire' and 'experimur' here as immediate knowledge (of the third kind), they still differ from Wetlesen's mystical way of knowledge, which he does not identify with this scientia intuitiva.

So, according to my opinion, Wetlesen's interpretation of Spinoza is not convincing, for his basic arguments are insufficient. The parallelism he tries to show with a certain kind of Buddhist insight meditation is interesting and at first sight striking. We should not have expected this. If there were a parallelism with some kind of mysticism, we should have expected this with some kind of Jewish mysticism. Wetlesen thinks that the Buddhist principle of Right Mindfulness runs parallel with Spinoza's transcendental body awareness. But here too, I am afraid, I must disagree with Wetlesen. The similarity is only superficial and therefore according to my principle of interpretation 3 mentioned above, we cannot speak of an affinity between Spinoza and Buddhism. Let me quote a Buddhist standard text for this body awareness and let the reader judge for himself. He will discover that the Buddhist disciple lives in a world that is totally different from Spinoza's:

(A. The four postures): When he walks the disciple knows 'I am walking'; when he stands he knows 'I stand', when he sits he knows 'I sit', and when he lies down, he knows 'I lie down'. In whichever position his body may be, he knows that it is in that position...

(B. Clear comprehension): The disciple acts clearly conscious when 1. he sets out (on the alms round) or returns (from it); 2. looks straight ahead or in other directions; 3. bends and stretches (his limbs); 4. in wearing the garments and carrying the alms-bowl; 5. when he eats, drinks, chews and tastes; 6. discharges excrement and urine; 7. walks, stands, sits; is asleep or awake; talks or keeps silent.
Now, is this Spinoza? Can we imagine him walking through the streets, being aware of his body in a yoga manner at each step? It is a completely different world! And this only the first stage. Further on the disciple is expected to produce in himself a repudiation of the sensory world and a distaste for the body and its functions. Now this clearly contradicts Spinoza’s attitude towards his body. It is unnecessary to verify this with a great number of quotations. Let me by way of example quote the famous proposition 5P39: ‘He who possesses a body fit for many things, possesses a mind of which the greater part is eternal.’ I could, of course, go deeper into the parallels Wetlesen draws. Sometimes they are striking, sometimes they are doubtful. An example of the latter is the parallel he draws between Spinoza’s modes and the Buddhist dharmas, for dharmas are ‘things as they appear, when viewed by wisdom’, which is not the same as Spinoza’s modes. But all forms of parallels, if read in their context and compared with Spinoza, show that they belong to different worlds.

Certainly, Spinoza’s philosophy has a mystical structure and we can draw parallels with various mystical systems as I did in my previous article. But mystical experiences in the way the great ‘real’ mystics experienced them are alien to Spinoza’s philosophy. I must come to this conclusion. I am very sorry indeed.

NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 129.
3 Ibid., pp. 129ff.
5 See what Wetlesen mentions as characteristics, in Ibid., p. 492.
6 Ibid., p. 479.
7 Ibid., p. 481.
8 Ibid., p. 482.
9 Ibid., p. 483.
10 Ibid., p. 483.
11 Epistola 76 (Opera, ed. C. Gebhardt, Heidelberg, 1924, IV, p. 320).
12 5P36Sch (Opera, II, p. 303).
13 Wetlesen, op. cit., p. 483.
14 5P36Sch (Opera, II, p. 303).
15 Wetlesen, op. cit., p. 482.
16 2P40Sch2 (Opera, II, p. 122).
17 De Nagelaten Schriften van B. D. S., Amsterdam, 1677, pp. 88f.
18 Wetlesen, op. cit., p. 485. I am afraid, however, that contrary to what Wetlesen suggests in note 15 of his paper, Guercuit’s remarks on Spinoza’s mysticism do not go further than some kind of rationalistic mysticism, similar to the one that I defend.
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21 See Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione, para. 35 (Opera, II, p. 15); 2Axx (ibid., p. 86), etc. ‘Sentire’ in this sense is often equated with perciere (see 2P49Sch, ibid., p. 133), which is very often more than only observing as it is done by our sense organs (see for example, I Def. 4, ibid., p. 45).
22 Wetlesen, op. cit., p. 479.
24 Ibid., pp. 78ff.
25 Ibid., pp. 95ff.

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