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The cosmoplastic system of the universe : Ralph Cudworth on Stoic naturalism

Guido GIGLIONI *

Résumé : Cet article traite d'un épisode significatif de l'histoire de la réception du stoïcisme dans la première modernité – à savoir l'interprétation de la philosophie stoïcienne que Ralph Cudworth a intégrée dans son projet d'une investigation complète de l'athéisme, dans son sens à la fois théorique et historique. Il s'agit plus précisément d'étudier la manière selon laquelle Cudworth utilise des éléments caractéristiques de la conception stoïcienne de la nature en vue de renforcer sa propre conception de la nature plastique. En traitant du stoïcisme, Cudworth adopte une attitude réservée et circonspecte en raison du risque d'être associé aux conceptions contemporaines de la nature plus ou moins athées (atomiste, hylozoïste, hylopathique et cosmoplastique – pour reprendre sa propre classification quadripartite des principales variétés de l'athéisme). Cudworth affirme que le « système cosmoplastique de l'univers » représente une version spécifiquement stoïcienne de l'athéisme. En même temps, il déploie tous ses efforts pour montrer que le « cosmoplastisme » doit être soigneusement distingué de l'interprétation théiste et « correcte » du naturalisme stoïcien.

Mots-clés : nature plastique ; vie ; athéisme ; spinozisme.

Summary : This article deals with a significant episode in the history of the early-modern reception of Stoicism – namely, Ralph Cudworth's interpretation of Stoic philosophy as part of his project of producing a complete investigation of atheism, in both a historical and theoretical sense. More specifically, the article focuses on the way in which Cudworth uses elements characteristic of the Stoic conception of nature in order to strengthen the case for his own notion of plastic nature. In dealing with Stoicism, Cudworth's attitude is reticent and circumspect because of the danger of being linked with contemporary more or less atheistical views of nature (atomistic, hylozoistic, hylopathian, and cosmoplastic – to cite his own fourfold classification of the principal varieties of atheism). Cudworth argues that the « cosmoplastic system of the universe » represents a specifically Stoic version of atheism. At the same time, though, he is at pains to show that cosmoplasticism has to be carefully distinguished from the theistical and « correct » interpretation of Stoic naturalism.

Keywords : plastic nature ; life ; atheism ; Spinozism.

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The revival of the Stoic view of nature as reason embedded in matter has undoubtedly played an important role in the making of the modern notion of nature. The strong emphasis on the very rationality of being and the ordered chain of causes met the requirements of the new philosophies of nature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (including various currents of the mechanical philosophy) ¹. Ideas of an all-embracing form of providential care of the world and of one universal vital force capable of organizing the world from within, however, gave rise to a number of serious difficulties of a theoretical nature not only for those authors who, from a religious point of view, were concerned with securing a theistic and transcendent view of providence, but also for those who were determined to expel all ideas of inherently sentient life and formative self-organizing powers from the material structure of the universe. When compared with the resolute opposition to the classic notion of nature expressed by such authors as René Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche and Robert Boyle, Cudworth's position seems to be open to a more nuanced and complex understanding of the role of nature in the created world. For this reason, his critique of Stoic naturalism provides us with significant elements of discussion and lays bare the intellectual tensions underlying the early-modern notion of nature.

1 - On the influence of Stoicism on the development of early-modern science, see : Peter Barker and Bernard R. Goldstein, *Is seventeenth century physics indebted to the Stoics ?*, *Centaurus*, XXVII (1984), 148-164 ; Peter Barker, Jean Pena and *Stoic physics in the sixteenth century*, in *Spindel conference 1984 : Recovering the Stoics*, *Southern journal of philosophy*, XIII (suppl.) (1985), 93-107 ; Id., *Stoic contributions to early modern science*, in *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquillity : Epicurean and Stoic themes in European thought*, ed. by Margaret J. Osler (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991), 135-154 ; Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, *Stoic and Epicurean doctrines in Newton's system of the world*, in *Atoms, pneuma, and tranquillity*, *op. cit. supra*, 222-238 ; Bernard Joly, *Présence des concepts de la physique stoïcienne dans les textes alchimiques du XVII^e siècle*, in *Alchimie et philosophie à la Renaissance*, ed. by Jean-Claude Margolin et Sylvain Matton (Paris : Vrin, 1993), 341-354 ; Gad Freudenthal, *Clandestine Stoic concepts in mechanical philosophy : The problem of electrical attraction*, in *Renaissance and revolution : Humanists, scholars, craftsmen and natural philosophers in early modern Europe*, ed. by Judith Veronica Field and Frank A. James (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161-172 ; Miguel Ángel Granada, *Giordano Bruno et la Stoa : Une présence non reconnue de thèmes stoïciens ?*, in *Le Stoïcisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle : Le retour des philosophies antiques à l'âge classique*, ed. by Pierre-François Moreau (Paris : Albin Michel, 1999), 140-174 ; Bernard Joly, *Physique stoïcienne et philosophie chimique au XVII^e siècle*, in *Le Stoïcisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle...*, *op. cit. supra*, 281-301.

The place of Stoic naturalism in the development of the atheistic systems of the universe

In his both erudite and intellectually challenging treatment of ancient philosophy, Cudworth described the antique notion of God as resting on two basic assumptions : the identification of the world with its divine principle ², and the consequent deification of the world and its parts ³. « God's pervading all things, and his being all things ⁴ » is the maxim in which Cudworth encapsulated the meaning of ancient pantheism and polytheism. In his *True intellectual system of the universe* (1678), Cudworth argued that the renowned soul of the world was an integral part of this picture, an ontological entity performing a crucial function of mediation between nature and God. Its importance could vary depending on the relationship that God was supposed to entertain with the world, either as a ruling but separate mind or as an informing vital principle – either *nous hypercosmios* or *nous enkosmios*. Cudworth interpreted the view of God as the principle of reason immanent in the universe, *i. e.*, as the *nature* of the whole cosmos, as one of the distinctive traits of the ancient philosophy of nature, turned by the Stoic sect into a central tenet of philosophical thought :

« [God] was commonly called Nature also, that being thus defined by some of the Stoics : *Deus mundo permistus*, « God mingled throughout with the world » ; and, *Divina Ratio toti mundo insita*, « The divine Reason inserted into the whole world ». Which Nature notwithstanding, in way of distinction from the particular natures of things, was called *koine physis* and *communis natura*, « the common nature ». And it was plainly declared by them not to be a senseless nature ; according to that of Balbus in Cicero : *Natura est, quae continet mundum omnem, eamque tuetur ; atque ea quidem non sine sensu, atque ratione*, « It is nature, by which the whole world is contained and upheld, but this such a nature as is not without sense and reason ». As it is elsewhere said to be perfect and eternal Reason, the divine mind and wisdom containing also under

2 - Ralph Cudworth, *The True intellectual system of the universe* (Bristol : Thoemmes Press, 1995 ; reprint of the 1845 ed.), II, 240 (abbreviation : *TIS*) : « [...] according to the pagan theology, God was conceived to be diffused throughout the whole world, to permeate and pervade all things, to exist in all things, and intimately to act all things. »

3 - *Ibid.*, 252-253 : « [...] this is that which is properly called the physiological theology of the Pagans, their personating and deifying (in a certain sense) the things of nature, whether inanimate substances, or the affections of substances. »

4 - *Ibid.*, 286-287.

it all the *logoi spermatikoi*, « the spermatic principles », by which the things of nature (commonly so called) are effected ⁵. »

We can read this passage as a recapitulation of the Stoic notion of the deity. By emphasizing the characters of immanence and rationality, the Stoics regarded God both as the one reason embracing the whole cosmos and as an inexhaustible reservoir of innumerable spermatic reasons. Distancing himself somehow from the Church Fathers – who, according to Cudworth, had looked at Stoic naturalism with a deep sense of suspicion ⁶ – Cudworth's attitude towards the ancient philosophy of nature in general (and towards Stoicism in particular) was more open and nuanced. Cudworth's sophistication in exegesis depended also, as it were, on the condition of philosophical hindsight on which he could rely after the diffusion of Cartesianism in England. His reinterpretation of the tradition of classical philosophy happened in that particular historical juncture when the effects of Descartes' philosophy were being felt in all the main departments of human thought. In Cudworth's case, exposure to Descartes' metaphysics created the ideal conditions for stimulating new interpretative directions, as, for example, the discussion of the Cartesian idea of the mind as self-consciousness (« perfect knowledge and understanding without consciousness is nonsense and impossibility ⁷ ») and the urgent need to elaborate a new theoretical model of nature different both from mere conventionalism, whether of Hobbesian or Cartesian origin, and from the traditional depiction of nature as a mere instrument of God's providence (with the constant danger of turning nature into a sort of semi-deity). This hermeneutical tension in Cudworth's interpretation of ancient philosophy becomes particularly evident every time he deals with the twin notions of theism and atheism.

5 - *TIS*, 288. On the principles of Stoic physics, see : Samuel Sambursky, *Physics of the Stoics* (London : Hutchinson, 1971) ; Harold A. K. Hunt, *A physical interpretation of the universe : The doctrines of Zeno the Stoic* (Melbourne : Melbourne University Press, 1976) ; David E. Hahm, *The Origins of Stoic cosmology* (Columbus : Ohio State University, 1977), 136-174 ; Robert M. Todd, Monism and immanence : The foundations of Stoic physics, in *The Stoics*, ed. by John Rist (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1978), 137-160.

6 - *TIS*, II, 240-241 : « Clemens Alexandrinus writheth thus of the Stoics : « [...] They affirm, that God doth pervade all the matter of the universe, and even the most vile parts thereof », which that father seems to dislike ; as also did Tertullian, when he represented their doctrine thus : *Stoici volunt Deum sic per materiam decurrisse, quomodo mel per favos*, « the Stoics will have God so to run through the matter, as the honey doth the combs ». » See also *ibid.*, 290.

7 - *Ibid.*, I, 273.

Consciousness is probably the most important element in Cudworth's definition of God. His recurrent argument was that the ultimate principle of the universe must be endowed with self-awareness and with the knowledge of the scope of its power to prevent such a principle from degenerating into an insentient and impersonal living being, or worse, into an inert mass of matter set in motion by external forces. In Cudworth's opinion, both the characteristics of insentient life and inert matter failed to account for the variety of forms of knowledge that could be seen in the universe, and more specifically, for that kind of knowledge which seemed to be in charge of the innumerable operations of nature. Cudworth showed that four principal forms of atheism (hylozoistic, cosmoplastic, atomistic, and hylopathian) originated from the very inability to understand the nature of life and knowledge, for life and knowledge could only be understood by referring to, respectively, insentient activity and self-consciousness. It was especially the emphasis on the unconscious nature of the cause of the universe that, in Cudworth's interpretation, condemned all the atheistic systems of nature to a status of unfounded dogmatism and ontological inconsistency. He could not see how a principle that was supposed to be the ultimate source of meaning and life – be it nature or matter – could perform its actions without being acquainted with the very knowledge of what it is doing.

Besides the notion of insentient activity, the concept of « fatalism » was the other distinctive component in Cudworth's definition of atheism. Indeed, one might characterize Cudworth's philosophical project as a thorough investigation into the very nature of fatalism and its various implications. Edward Chandler, the Bishop of Durham who in 1731 edited Cudworth's *Treatise concerning eternal and immutable morality*, wrote in the preface to that work that Cudworth's original plan was to deal with « three sorts of Fatality⁸ », the same three types of « fatality » with which the *True intellectual system of the universe* opens, *i. e.*, the « Democritic Fate » (which can be regarded as sheer atheism because it identifies natural causality with material necessity), « divine Fate immoral » (corresponding to Calvinistic and Puritan predestinarianism) and

8 - Edward Chandler, « The preface » to Ralph Cudworth, *A treatise concerning eternal and immutable morality* (London, 1731). See Graham Alan John Rogers, *Innate ideas and the ancient philosophy in Cudworth's epistemology*, in « *Mind senior to the world* » : *Stoicismo e origenismo nella filosofia platonica del Seicento inglese*, ed. by Marialuisa Baldi (Milano : Angeli, 1996), 156. See also the edition of Cudworth's *Treatise* by Sarah Hutton (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997).

logical fatalism (in which « necessity » is considered « to be intrinsic to the nature of every thing »). Of the three forms of necessity – the material, the religious and the ideal – Cudworth identified the third one – namely, the necessity resulting from the self-contained nature of ideas – as the type of fatalism championed by the Stoics :

« [...] this may be called the Divine Fate moral (as the other immoral), and natural (as the other violent) ; it being a concatenation, or implexed series of causes, all in themselves necessary, depending upon a Deity moral (if we may so speak) that is, such as is essentially good and naturally just, as the head thereof ; the first contriver and orderer of all. Which kind of Divine Fate hath not only been formerly asserted by the Stoics, but also of late by divers modern writers ⁹. »

The hint at « divers modern writers » who were contemporary supporters of divine fatalism is no doubt intriguing. Unfortunately, as is often the case, Cudworth does not name names. However, his principal « distribution » of the intellectual systems (namely, the already-mentioned « quadripartition » of atheism) provides us with some other clues. Cudworth argued that, unlike atomistic (« Democritical ») and hylopathian (« Anaximandrian ») forms of atheism – which both advocated the primacy of bare passive matter and explained the origin of all the material transformations in nature by way of atoms in the first case and by way of forms educed from matter in the second –, hylozoistic (« Stratonical ») and cosmoplastic (« Stoical ») atheisms presupposed one common source of life inherent in the material universe. He also added, though, the important distinction whereby Stoic atheism differed from hylozoism in that it presupposed the existence of one common active principle pervading and organizing the whole world (and not the existence of as many principles of life as particles of matter, as was the case with hylozoistic atheism) and it explained the very organisation of the universe as was direct and inevitable result of the formative power of nature (and not, as was the case with hylozoism, in terms of a combined action of nature and chance) ¹⁰. Commenting on a passage from Seneca's *Naturales quaestiones* (III, 29),

9 - *TIS*, I, xxxiii-xxxv, 4.

10 - *Ibid.*, 193-194 : « [...] this form of atheism, which supposes the whole world (there being nothing but one body in it) not to be an animal, but only a great plant or vegetable, having one spermatic form, or plastic nature, which without any conscious reason or understanding orders the whole, though it have some nearer correspondence with that hylozoic form of atheism before described, in that it does not suppose nature to be a

Cudworth argued that the universe could be represented as a huge plant, devoid of sense perception and endowed only with plastic and spermatic activity. « Wherefore this form of atheism, which supposes one plastic or spermatic nature, one plantal or vegetative life in the whole world, as the highest principle, may, for distinction sake, be called the Pseudo-Stoical, or Stoical atheism ¹¹. » From this quotation, it seems that for Cudworth a unilateral consideration of plastic life, devoid of any reference to a transcendent principle of self-aware knowledge, implied a descent into atheism, for, as we know by now, such consideration would remove « any clearly intellectual principle or conscious nature » from the system of the universe ¹².

Now, if we go back to Cudworth's elaborate divisions of forms of fatalism and atheism (*i. e.*, three types of fatalism – material, religious and ideal – and four types of atheism – atomistic, hylopathic, cosmoplastic and hylozoistic), we will notice that in this complex scheme Stoicism occupies two different niches : the cosmoplastic variety (atheistic naturalism) derives from the kind of fatalism that is based on material necessity, while the moral variety (theistic naturalism) derives from the type of fatalism that is based on « divine fate moral ». Unlike cosmoplasticism, which rests upon the material necessity of nature, moral fatalism presupposes a form of logical and ideal necessity resulting from the very cogency of eternal natures and ideas. Consequently, Cudworth offered two somehow different views of Stoicism, the one contained in the threefold division of fatalism, the other in the « quadripartition » of atheism. If one follows the threefold division of fatalism, Stoics may be said to have insisted on the rational necessity of the universe and on the teleological activity of infinite spermatic reasons. If instead one decides to follow the pattern of the « quadripartition » of atheism, Stoics are seen as those philosophers who attributed « the original of this whole mundane system » to « one artificial, orderly

mere fortuitous, but a kind of artificial thing ; yet it differs from it in this, that the hylozoic supposing all matter, as such, to have life essentially belonging to it, must therefore needs attribute to every part of matter (or at least every particular totum, that is one by continuity) a distinct plastic life of its own, but acknowledge no one common life, as ruling over the whole corporeal universe ; and consequently impute the original of all things (as hath been already observed) to a certain mixture of chance, and plastic or methodical nature, both together. Whereas the cosmoplastic atheism quite excludes fortune and chance, subjecting all things to the regular and orderly fate of one plastic or plantal nature, ruling over the whole. »

11 - *TIS*, 198.

12 - *Ibid.*, 194.

and methodical, but senseless nature, lodged in the matter ». To recapitulate, then, Cudworth interpreted Stoicism as a form of rigorous corporealism insofar as he looked at the Stoic notion of God in terms of a vital principle coextensive with the corporeal world. Insofar as he thought that the Stoics had assumed a sentient and « animalish » principle underlying nature, he interpreted Stoicism as a degeneration of a more ancient « Heraclitic and Zenonian Cabala ». He called this view « cosmozoism »¹³.

The domain of cosmozoism is where Cudworth treaded most cautiously, for, the « *right* Heraclitic and Zenonian Cabala » was in fact the « true » hypothesis underlying Cudworth's own intellectual system, that is, the view that the life of the universe splits into two principles – the one transcendent and intellectual (« an animalish, sentient and intellectual nature, or a conscious soul and mind, that presided over the whole world »), the other immanent and devoid of perception (« a certain plastic nature, or spermatic principle which was properly the fate of all things »)¹⁴. Cudworth was well aware that it took only the smallest shift for the « Zenonian Cabala » to turn into Stoic cosmoplastic atheism. It seems therefore safe to say that in Cudworth's elaborate genealogy of atheism, Stoics belonged to that group of philosophers who « went as it were in a middle » between real atheists and theists – « they were neither better nor worse than a kind of imperfect Theists »¹⁵. Cudworth believed that there could be a certain « latitude » in theism and that some room was still available for the Stoics¹⁶. However, the very notion of « a living intellectual body eternal » remained the most serious difficulty for Cudworth. This metaphysical cornerstone of Stoic philosophy was for him a self-contradictory notion. He thought that, by definition, an intellectual principle meant to be a source of both life and knowledge could not be a body. And yet this was precisely the crux of the Stoic argument about God and nature according to Cudworth. Stoics claimed to be able to reconcile the original notion of unmade matter with the equally original idea of life as a substantial (not accidental) principle. By recovering the

13 - *TIS*, 196. See Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II, 14. On Zeno's adherence to Heraclitus' theory of fire, see Margherita Isnardi Parente, *Introduzione allo stoicismo ellenistico* (Roma-Bari : Laterza, 1993), 22-23, 26.

14 - *TIS*, I, 196 (italics mine).

15 - *Ibid.*, 305.

16 - *Ibid.*, III, 83 : « [...] neither Plutarch nor the Stoics, as we conceive, are for this to be accounted absolute and downright Atheists, but only imperfect, mongrel, and spurious Theists. » See also *ibid.*, 404.

original inspiration of the pre-Socratic cosmologies and by stating that reality, at its highest degree (*ton hyparchon*), was corporeal substance, the Stoic solution had for Cudworth all the appearance of a materialistic reprise of the Aristotelian concepts of matter and form ¹⁷.

On the other hand, insofar as the Stoics described the first principle of the universe in terms of « animality and conscious life », Cudworth thought that they still could be seen as real theists ¹⁸. In his opinion, the Stoic view of the universe as a system planned and ordered by God's mind, and not resulting from chance or material necessity, could be reconciled with the renowned argument from design. The similarities rested on the following tenets : that there was « as much continued and coherent sense, and as many several combinations in this real poem of the world, as there is in any fantastic poem made by men » ; that there was an « agreeing and conspiring cognation of things » ; and, finally, that the harmonious complexity of the system presupposed the existence of a « scale of nature », or a « gradual perfection of things in the universe, one above another » ¹⁹. Given all these premises, Cudworth could see no problem in enlisting the Stoic philosophers in the theistic front against atheism :

« By such argumentations as these (besides that taken from the topic of prescience and divination) did the ancient Stoics endeavour to demonstrate the existence of a God, or a universal Numen, the maker and governor of the whole world ; and that such a one, as was not a mere plastic or methodical and senseless, but a conscious and perfectly intellectual nature. So that the world to them was neither a mere heap and congeries of dead and stupid matter, fortuitously compacted together ; nor yet a huge plant or vegetable, that is endued with a spermatic principle only ; but an animal informed and enlivened by an intellectual soul. And though, being corporealists, they sometimes called the whole world itself or mundane animal, God ; and sometimes the fiery principle in it, as intellectual, and the Hegemonic of the mundane soul ; yet was the god of the Stoics properly, not the very matter itself, but that great

17 - After all, a certain wavering between the intellectualistic heritage of Socrates and Zeno's physical Heraclitism within the Stoic school is acknowledged by the most recent philosophical historiography. See Parente, *op. cit.* in n. 13, 21, 40.

18 - *TIS*, I, 305 ; II, 97-98.

19 - *Ibid.*, II, 98.

soul, mind, and understanding, or in Seneca's language, that « *ratio incorporalis* », that rules the matter of the whole world ²⁰. »

Seen in this light, God was not merely the spermatic reason of the universe, but also (and above all) its mind. Of course, Cudworth could not deny the fact that Stoics had still admitted a plurality of gods, but, in his opinion, such gods were perishable entities subject to the ravages of time. This was consistent with the Stoic thesis that everything was a body and would in the end dissolve through successive conflagrations. What Cudworth interpreted as being immutable and remaining the same at the end of each cyclical destruction of the world was the active and intellectual fiery principle, in the form of a providential intelligence diffused throughout the world ²¹.

It goes without saying, however, that such a solution looks too easy and is open to a certain degree of ontological ambiguity. If it is true that both the active and the passive principles are « really but one and the self-same substance », it is also true that the Stoics « neither made matter alone nor God, the sole principle of all things ; but joined them both together and held two first principles or self-existent unmade beings, independent upon one another, God, and the matter » ²² – which means that for Cudworth Stoic monism was, in fact, a form of ontological dualism. Every time the emphasis was laid on the uniqueness of substance, though, the tendency to privilege corporealism could not be denied, and in that case the Stoics were clearly upholding the heretic doctrine of the « self-existence and improduction of matter ²³ », in which matter was identified with « artificial fire ²⁴ ». From this point of view, Cudworth did not hesitate to associate the Stoics with some « Materialian heretics » of the past (the most famous of whom being Tertullian) and « some modern sects of the Christian profession, at this day » ²⁵. Like the Stoics, they deemed « body to be the only

20 - *TIS*, 101.

21 - *Ibid.*, 103-105, 108.

22 - *Ibid.*, I, 300.

23 - *Ibid.*, 303.

24 - *Ibid.*, II, 219 : « Now Plutarch and Stobaeus testify, that the Stoics did not only call nature, but also the supreme Deity itself (the architect of the whole world), *technikon pyr*, « an artificial fire », they conceiving him to be corporeal. »

25 - In the explanatory notes added to his Latin translation of the *True intellectual system of the universe* (*Systema intellectuale huius universi seu de veris naturae rerum originibus commentarii, quibus omnis eorum philosophia, qui deum esse negant, funditus evertitur*, Jena, 1733), Johann Lorenz von Mosheim specified that in that locus Cudworth

substance ²⁶ ». As « sottish Corporealists », the Stoics put forward a whole series of unsustainable doctrines : the corporeity of the souls (whether of animals or men), the mortality of the souls (despite their ability to last for a while after death), and above all the repulsive hypothesis that even accidents and qualities (including passions and actions of the mind) are bodies ²⁷.

To recapitulate, then, we can say that Cudworth considered the Stoic claim that life in the whole universe was one and corporeal as the most puzzling feature of cosmoplastic naturalism. He interpreted Stoic corporealism as an inconsistent tenet, irreconcilable with the assumption that the ultimate principle was « all in the whole » and to act « upon every part ». Cudworth argued that such a principle, being in control of the whole world and acting everywhere knowingly and expediently, was necessarily immaterial ²⁸.

Nature as plastic activity

Cudworth's discussion of Stoic metaphysics centred around the question of whether the world as a self-active and self-sufficient being could be regarded as an animal or a plant. The authorities he constantly referred to were not always in agreement. For Diogenes Laertius, Zeno distinguished two ways in which the mind could actualise the body of the world : some parts were actualised « as a habit (as through the bones and nerves) », others « as mind or understanding (as through that which is called the Hegemonicon or Principle) ». Laertius' passage, in Cudworth's translation, represented two possible ways of understanding God by the Stoics – either as

meant « the Socinians ». (*TIS*, I, 304 ; in this article I will quote from the English translation of Mosheim's notes in the 1845 edition of Cudworth's *True intellectual system*.) On Mosheim and Cudworth see Eginhard Peter Meijering, *Mosheim on the difference between Christianity and Platonism : A contribution to the discussion about methodology*, *Vigiliae Christianae*, XXXI (1977), 68-73 ; Francesco Tomasoni, *Il « Sistema intellettuale » di Cudworth fra l'edizione originale e la traduzione latina di Mosheim : Culmine e crisi di un equilibrio*, *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, XLVI (1991), 629-660 ; Marialuisa Baldi, *Confutazione e conferma : L'origenismo nella traduzione latina del True intellectual system (1733)*, in « *Mind senior to the world* », *op. cit.* in n. 8, 163-204 ; Sarah Hutton, *Classicism and Baroque : A note on Mosheim's footnotes to Cudworth's The True intellectual system of the universe*, in *Johann Lorenz Mosheim (1693-1755 : Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Philosophie, Philologie und Geschichte* (Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997), 211-227.

26 - *TIS*, I, 304.

27 - *Ibid.*, II, 95-97.

28 - *Ibid.*, I, 213-214.

an immanent force or as an intelligent and self-aware principle²⁹. Cudworth seemed to privilege the view of the Stoic cosmos as « one spermatic, plastic and artificial nature » – a view in which the universe was seen as a plant rather than an animal³⁰. In doing so, Cudworth was trying to reconcile the Stoic cosmos with his own view of a living universe animated by the unconscious vitality of the plastic nature³¹.

In Cudworth's opinion, however, the problem with the Stoics was that they had gone too far in their denial of any underlying, deeper intellectual and perceptive principle, and even when they had acknowledged such a foundation, they had identified it with the very self-active body of fire. By doing so, he concluded that they had ended in a form of crass materialism. David E. Hahm has described the Stoic cosmology as a kind of « cosmobiology », in which a rational fire pervaded all aspects of the world³², but for Cudworth, the plastic organisation of the world endorsed by the Stoics boiled down to the characteristically ancient view of the deity, favoured among others by « the learned and industrious Vossius », whereby « the Pagans' universal Numen was no other than a senseless nature or spermatic reason of the whole world, undirected by any higher intellectual principle »³³. Cosmobiology was not a sufficiently spiritual view. He argued that Stoic cosmoplastic corporealism, like hylozoism, presupposed a theory of matter as a thoroughly self-sustaining entity, in the form of an intrinsically living substratum. As a consequence, the cosmoplastic thinkers (like the hylozoists) committed the crucial error of misinterpreting the essential feature of plastic nature, that is to say, they did not hesitate to derive a perfectly wise and omniscient active principle, devoid of « animal-sense, self-perception, and consciousness », from the « lower senseless life of nature », which, in fact, – Cudworth reminded the reader – could only be « the mere

29 - *TIS*, II, 290.

30 - *Ibid.*, I, 19 ; II, 10 ; 621.

31 - On Cudworth's notion of plastic nature, see Alain Petit, Ralph Cudworth, un platonisme paradoxal : La Nature dans la *Digression concerning the plastick life of nature*, in *The Cambridge Platonists in philosophical context : Politics, metaphysics and religion*, ed. by Graham Alan John Rogers, Jean-Michel Vienne and Yves-Charles Zarka (Dordrecht : Kluwer, 1997), 101-110 ; Sarah Hutton, Aristotle and the Cambridge Platonists : The case of Cudworth, in *Philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries : Conversations with Aristotle*, ed. by Constance Blackwell and Sachiko Kusukawa (Aldershot : Ashgate, 1999), 337-349.

32 - Hahm, *op. cit.* in n. 5.

33 - *TIS*, II, 215.

umbrage of intellectuality, a faint and shadowy imitation of mind and understanding ». What is worse, both cosmoplastic and hylozoistic philosophers described the plastic life of nature in terms of a corporeal substance, an assumption that clashed with Cudworth's conception of plastic nature as an immaterial principle. For Cudworth, a plastic nature, albeit « the lowest of all lives », could only be incorporeal, « all life being essentially such »³⁴.

In the *True intellectual system of the universe*, the philosophical belief in the self-active and self-sufficient status of matter represents the theoretical linchpin of atheism. In Cudworth's opinion, the resulting reification of nature into an independent substance was of momentous significance. The same was true of the transformation of the plastic virtue, which in Cudworth's philosophy was an insentient faculty under the direct control of the mind, into a cognitive power. From such a topsy-turvy treatment of substantial and accidental attributes of being, Cudworth drew the conclusion that no atheists – and much less the Stoics – « can solve the phenomenon of nature »³⁵. As a further consequence, the reification of nature involved its very « deification ». As we have seen, one of the ways of understanding the Stoic notion of God at the time was to regard it as an immanent force pervading the whole universe. Cudworth was well aware that in many cases the deification of the inanimate nature of things had been used as a poetic device to interpret the action of natural powers³⁶. Indeed, Stoic « physiological theology », in Cudworth's reconstruction, had originated as a system of allegorical interpretations of the ancient myths : « [...] long before the times of Christianity, those first Stoics, Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus, were famous for the great pains which they took in allegorizing these poetic fables of the gods »³⁷. » On a more speculative level, though, Cudworth remained convinced that there was no justification for identifying God with nature. Throughout his life, he was concerned with the fact that the direction taken by some

34 - *TIS*, I, 272-273.

35 - *Ibid.*, II, 621.

36 - *Ibid.*, 255 ; Mosheim, *ibid.*, 106 : « The rest of the gods extolled by the poets, were altogether repudiated by the Stoics, who contended, that they were nothing more than parts of the nature of things, clothed by poetic fiction in the human form. Hence arose those numerous physical explications of the ancient fables concerning the gods, which have for the most part come down to our own times, and in which this sect in particular took a wonderful delight. »

37 - *Ibid.*, 253.

philosophers at the time was a movement towards a literal, unpoetic identification of God with nature. Baruch Spinoza, to mention one of the most famous of these contemporary authors, adopted the leitmotiv *Deus sive natura* and laid the foundations for one of the most consistent and compelling forms of ontological monism and ethical determinism.

Cosmoplasmic naturalism and Spinozism

As already seen, one of the theses resulting from Cudworth's interpretation of Stoic philosophy was the view that cosmoplasmic naturalism, when treated atheistically, inevitably led to pantheism or, worse, to plain materialism. Stoic philosophers, Cudworth insisted, viewed God both as a totally immanent power that displayed its energy and life throughout the physical forms of the material universe and as a provident and intellectual law superintending over the universe down to the least detail. Such an emphasis on life and mind did not, however, prevent them from regarding each manifestation of being (including souls) as corporeal phenomena. Cudworth's emphasis on the contradictory nature of Stoic physico-theology was consistent with his general view of pagan theology : among the reasons for the « breaking and crumbling » of the notion of God into a great many deities, Cudworth highlighted the fact that the heathens « considered not the Deity according to its simple nature, and abstractly only, but concretely also with the world, as he displayeth himself therein, pervadeth all, and diffuseth his virtues through all ³⁸ ». Cudworth thought that this interpretation of God and nature was a recurrent episode in history and that it was taking place again in his own time.

« Some fanatics of latter times, he wrote, have made God to be all, in a gross sense, so as to take away all real distinction betwixt God and the creature, and indeed to allow no other being besides God ; they supposing the substance of every thing, and even of all inanimate bodies, to be the very substance of God himself, and all the variety of things that is in the world, to be nothing but God under several forms, appearances, and disguises ³⁹. »

It is unclear who these « fanatics of latter times » are. The context does not allow us to extrapolate unsubstantiated conclusions. In his

38 - *TIS*, 285-286.

39 - *Ibid.*, I, 513.

explanatory notes, Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1693-1755), the German Lutheran divine who translated the *True intellectual system of the universe* into Latin in 1733, suggested the names of Robert Fludd and Jacob Boehme⁴⁰. It is true, as one can argue from reading the treatise that Henry More devoted to the discussion of Jacob Boehme's philosophy, that at the time Behemenism was often perceived as yet another instance of monistic materialism based on the understanding of substance as a fully-autonomous being⁴¹. However, given Cudworth's ambivalent treatment of Stoicism, it would be incorrect to extend such a crude identification of God with the world to the Stoics, because the Stoics, wrote Cudworth, « anciently made God to be all, and all to be God, in somewhat a different way ; they conceiving God properly to be the active principle of the whole corporeal universe, which yet (because they admitted of no incorporeal substance) they supposed, together with the passive or the matter, to make up but one and the complete substance⁴² ».

The correct interpretation of the Stoic notion of nature is what mattered most to Cudworth (and it is not difficult to understand the reason behind when we think of the central place that plastic nature has in his philosophy). Here it may be worth looking at Mosheim's comments on this subject. Referring to Zeno's definition of nature as « a habit deriving motion from itself, according to spermatic reasons » and to Justus Lipsius' *Physiologia Stoicorum* (published in 1604), Mosheim had no qualms in charging the Stoics with confounding God and nature and making God the soul of the world and the world the body of God⁴³. While he denied that in the Stoic

40 - Mosheim, *ibid.*

41 - On More's interpretation of Behemenism see Sarah Hutton, Henry More and Jacob Boehme, in *Henry More (1614-1687) tercentenary studies*, ed. by S. Hutton (Dordrecht-London-Boston : Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990), 158-171.

42 - *TIS*, I, 513.

43 - Justus Lipsius, *Physiologiae Stoicorum libri tres* (Leiden, 1644), I, 22-26. On Lipsius' Stoicism, see : Léontine Zanta, *La Renaissance du stoïcisme au XVI^e siècle* (Paris : Honoré Champion, 1914), 151-240 ; Jason Lewis Saunders, Justus Lipsius : *The philosophy of Renaissance Stoicism* (New York : Liberal Arts, 1955) ; Günter Abel, *Stoicismus und Frühe Neuzeit : Zur Entstehungsgeschichte modernen Denkens im Felde von Ethik und Politik* (Berlin - New York : De Gruyter, 1978), 67-113 ; Jacqueline Lagrée, *Juste Lipse et la restauration du stoïcisme : Étude et traduction des traités stoïciens* De la constance, Manuel de philosophie stoïcienne, Physique des stoïciens (*extraits*) (Paris : Vrin, 1994) ; Bernard Joly, « Mundum animal esse » (*Physiologia Stoicorum* II, 10) : Retour au stoïcisme ou triomphe de l'hermétisme ?, in *Juste Lipse (1547-1606) en son temps* (Paris : Honoré Champion, 1996), 49-69 ; Gianni Paganini, Giusto Lipsio e la rinascita della fisica stoica, in *La geografia dei saperi : Scritti in memoria di Dino Pastine*,

philosophy of nature reason and plastic power could be regarded as two distinct principles, he acknowledged that they could be seen as « powers and perfections of one and the same God, or of that nature which they thought to be extended throughout the universe ». Mosheim reminded the reader that among the Stoics « nature » was « a flexible and ambiguous word », with which they designated « even God himself, whom they called by different names, sometimes Jove, sometimes fate, sometimes mind, sometimes nature »⁴⁴. He summed up Cudworth's conciliatory attitude towards the Stoic concept of deity (a solution that Mosheim did not « agree to ») with the following statement : « [...] the gods of the Stoics considered conjointly are God, and reversely the God of the Stoics considered in the several parts of nature is distributed into many gods »⁴⁵. » This absorption of pagan polytheism into a monistic view could then be reconciled with pantheism because, in Mosheim's interpretation, « the Stoical god is wholly immersed in matter, and ... diffused and extended through the whole universe ». The conclusion he drew from his exegetical analysis was that the God of the Stoics was « nothing but a fiery nature pervading the whole world »⁴⁶. Judging from these critical remarks, Mosheim was certainly less oblique than Cudworth in his condemnation of the materialistic and atheistic implications of the Stoic notion of nature. For Mosheim, ontological pluralism (*i. e.*, polytheism) was only a poetical device to hide a form of consistent monism and the dualism of life and body was only a metaphysical smokescreen to conceal the frightening thesis that the only existing substance was matter. Obviously, Mosheim was writing after Spinoza's philosophy had revealed the subversive power of a thoroughly monistic view of the universe in its full extent.

Unlike Mosheim, Cudworth had not been completely exposed to the impact of Spinoza's philosophy. In his critique of Stoic cosmology, there are moments when Cudworth seems to be referring to Spinoza's naturalism. For instance, Spinoza might well be one of

ed. by Domenico Ferraro and Gianna Gigliotti (Firenze : Le Lettere, 2000), 81-98 ; Jill Kraye, *Stoicism in the Renaissance from Petrarch to Lipsius*, *Grotiana*, XXII/XXIII (2001/2002), 21-45 ; Jan Papy, *Lipsius's (Neo-)Stoicism : Constancy between Christian faith and Stoic virtue*, *Grotiana*, XXII/XXIII (2001/2002), 47-71 ; Anthony A. Long, *Stoicism in the philosophical tradition : Spinoza, Lipsius, Butler*, in *Hellenistic and early modern philosophy*, ed. by Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7-29.

44 - *TIS*, I, 195-196.

45 - *Ibid.*, II, 107.

46 - *Ibid.*, 119.

the « modern writers » who asserted the « moral » and « natural » kind of « Divine Fate ». The very structure of the *True intellectual system of the universe*, which to a large extent can be read simultaneously on both a historical and a speculative level, would enable such a reading, except that the passages which unquestionably hint at Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* are scarce and engage with the view of religion as *instrumentum regni* more than with the ontological status of substance⁴⁷. Cudworth argued that it was a characteristic feature of ancient philosophy to distinguish between natural and true theology, on the one hand, and civil and political theology, on the other, a distinction that was acknowledged by all Greek philosophers, but « more expressly by Antistines, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics⁴⁸ ». In the *True intellectual system of the universe*, Cudworth pigeonholed Spinoza's contribution to the diffusion of atheism into this specific « distribution » of heretical views rather than in one of the four main divisions (atomistic, hylozoistic, cosmoplastic, and hylopathian). On the other hand, we know that in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza had in fact outlined an overarching conception of nature full of Stoic resonances. It was Mosheim who, fifty years later, reinforced the connection between Stoic naturalism, Spinozism and Cudworth's critique of atheism. The reasons for doing so were numerous. The philosophy of nature of the Stoics – especially after Lipsius' up-to-date reappraisal – could be regarded as a model of immanent naturalism, just as Spinoza himself could be viewed as a Stoic brought back to life⁴⁹. Cudworth often associated the quasi-pantheistic conception of the

47 - *Ibid.*, 564 ; III, 4. Mosheim, *ibid.*, III, 96 : « It is to be regretted therefore that the learned Doctor did not discourse more fully upon what properly deserves the name of substance, as well as upon other points involved in this controversy, ... but it may be stated in his excuse, that at that time Spinoza's doctrine of one substance was little known. » See Tomasoni, *op. cit.* in n. 25, who, nevertheless, mistakes Stratonism and Biusianism (which refer to Francis Glisson's philosophy) for Spinozism (650-651). On this question see Guido Giglioni, Anatomist atheist ? The « hylozoistic » foundations of Francis Glisson's anatomical research, in *Religio medici : Medicine and religion in seventeenth-century England*, ed. by Ole P. Grell and Andrew Cunningham (Aldershot : Scholar Press, 1996), 124-127 ; *Id.*, What ever happened to Francis Glisson ? Albrecht Haller and the fate of eighteenth-century irritability, *Science in context*, XXI (2008), 1-29.

48 - *TIS*, II, 198.

49 - See Alexandre Matheron, Le moment stoïcien de l'Éthique de Spinoza, in *Le Stoïcisme au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècle*, *op. cit.* in n. 1, 302-316 ; Susan James, Spinoza the Stoic, in *The Rise of modern philosophy : The tension between the new and traditional philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. by Tom Sorell (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1993), 289-316. See also Paul Oskar Kristeller, Stoic and Neoplatonic sources of Spinoza's *Ethics*, *History of European ideas*, V (1984), 1-15.

ancient physicists and poets with the Stoic idea of nature ⁵⁰, and in the *True intellectual system of the universe*, the Stoics, « sometimes confounding God with nature ⁵¹ », were often portrayed as pantheistic. Regarding the view « that God is all things and that the whole of this universe is in a certain respect God », Mosheim acknowledged that this opinion was widely diffused in Antiquity, so that one could « reckon among the masters of Ben. Spinoza almost all the noted sages of antiquity » ⁵². In another note, he commented on Spinoza's tendency to follow some of the ancient atheistic thinkers in employing the word God only as an oblique way of referring to « matter or the whole nature of things ». Here Mosheim specified that he was reporting the opinion of an « unquestionable source », which he avoided to name : « Of the moderns, Bened. de Spinoza belongs to this class ; who, although utterly repudiating all divine nature and reason, is nevertheless careful to employ the word God in his Ethics, lest his doctrine should appear too repulsive. » ⁵³

In Cudworth's *True intellectual system of the universe*, atheism is presented as a time-honoured intellectual position based on the philosophical assumption that nothing can be generated out of nothing, and from the ensuing corollary that everything that exists is either a body or accidents of a body. Against the atheistic threat, Cudworth argued that the best way of challenging its foundation – that is, matter as the only substance, eternal and immutable – was to assume the existence of a plurality of self-existent immaterial natures, such as souls and spirits, created by God (because they could not exist by themselves from all eternity). As Mosheim made clear in many of the comments he interspersed throughout its Latin translation of the *True intellectual system of the universe*, Spinoza's own variation upon the very ancient theme that nothing can be generated out of nothing intimated that one substance could not be produced by another substance, and that, accordingly, everything

50 - *TIS*, II, 261-262.

51 - *Ibid.*, I, 195.

52 - *Ibid.*, 516-518.

53 - *Ibid.*, 299. Mosheim is referring to Jean Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque ancienne et moderne* (Amsterdam : Wetstein, 1724), XXII, 134-136 : « [...] il y a eu un Juif, qui feignoit d'avoir embrassé le Christianisme, mais qui avoit plutôt imaginé un nouvel Athéisme, et qui a attiré bien des gens après lui, en ramenant la rêverie des Stoïciens [...] J'ai ouï dire à un homme digne de foi, qui me l'a même donné écrit de sa main, que *Spinosa* avoit composé sa prétendue *Ethique démontrée* en Flemand, et qu'il la donna à traduire en Latin à un Medicin, qui se nommoit *Louis Meyer* ; et que le mot de Dieu ne s'y trouvoit point ; mais seulement celui de la *Nature*, qu'il prétendoit être éternelle. »

in nature was merely the result of continuous modifications of one original substance.

The resolute rejection of Spinoza's notion of substance as a self-active and self-sufficient system was one of the most recurrent motives in the anxiously critical reactions to Spinoza's philosophy in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to Henry More and John Howe, for example, atheism as a theoretical system originated from the attempt to make each single substance independent, so much so that the very notion of substance was, as it were, deified⁵⁴. In Cudworth's interpretation, the atheistic reification of substance amounted to reducing substance to a corporeal entity, its activity to causal determinism, and each single thing to fleeting appearances in a system dominated by material necessity.

54 - On Spinoza in England see Rosalie Colie, *Light and Enlightenment : A study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminianism* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1957) ; Id., Spinoza in England, 1665-1730, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CVII (1963), 183-219 ; Luisa Simonutti, Spinoza and the English thinkers : Criticism on prophecies and miracles : Blount, Gildon, Earbery, in *Disguised and ouvert Spinozism around 1700*, ed. by Wiep Van Bunge and Wim Klever (Leiden : Brill, 1996), 191-211. On More's reaction to Spinoza see Alexander Jacob, *Henry More's refutation of Spinoza* (Hildesheim : Olms, 1991). On Howe's case see Luisa Simonutti, John Howe : Dissidente, neoplatonico e antispinozista, in « *Mind senior to the world* », *op. cit.* in n. 7, 255-291, esp. 285-291.