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ARTICLE



Gods and giants: Cudworth's platonic metaphysics and his ancient theology

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ABSTRACT

The Cambridge Platonists are modern thinkers and the context of seventeenth-century Cambridge science is an inalienable and decisive part of their thought. Cudworth's interest in ancient theology, however, seems to conflict with the progressive aspect of his philosophy. The problem of the nature, however, of this 'Platonism' is unavoidable. Even in his complex and recondite ancient theology Cudworth is motivated by philosophical considerations, and his legacy among philosophers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should not be overlooked. In particular we will draw on the scholarship of the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann in order to reassess the significance of Cudworth's theory of religion for later philosophical developments.

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Introduction

The successful curiosity of the present age, in arts and experiments and new systems, is apt to elate men, and make them overlook the ancients.

(Berkeley, *Siris*, §265)

The Cambridge Platonists furnish a decisive development in modern Western philosophy.¹ This is most apparent in Cudworth where we find a close proximity to Descartes in his use of mitigated scepticism in opposition both to scholastic deductive reasoning and neo-Epicurean materialism and a resolute insistence on the capacity of the mind to grasp normative facts. Cudworth insists upon human autonomy and freedom and has a dynamic conception of the *res extensa* as the production of a 'mind senior to the world'. Rejecting Descartes' voluntaristic theology, Cudworth nonetheless exhibits a profound kinship to Descartes' thoroughly modern project. This is reinforced by Cudworth's relish for the language of subjectivity and interest in reflexive

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¹See Gill, *British Moralists*; Beiser, *Sovereignty of Reason*; and Darwall, *British Moralists*.

constructions, including a first major theory of self-consciousness.² On such persuasive and scholarly narratives, the Cambridge Platonists look like resolute harbingers of the 'modern'. Yet one of the most discouraging features of these seventeenth-century Platonists for the modern reader lies in their anachronisms. Can one take any more seriously, for example, Cudworth's claim that Moses was an atomist than his reflections upon angels dancing upon pins (Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, henceforth TIS, II, 251)?

One might observe that fascination with arcane ancient sacred history is evident in a figure like Newton, and is tied to the widespread seventeenth-century conviction that modern science was a rediscovery of truths lost since the deluge or even before. Joseph Glanvill, author of *Lux Orientalis* (1662), was an Oxford man but nevertheless shared a closely 'Platonick' position. Glanvill's *The Summe of My Lord Bacon's New Atlantis: Anti-fanatical Religion and Free Philosophy* is clearly an idealized account of the Cambridge group by one of their admirers. In the *Lux Orientalis*, Glanvill explicitly expounds the concept of ancient theology in terms of the rejection of Aristotelian scholasticism, i.e. Milton's 'asinine feast of sow thistles and brambles' (*Areopagita and Other Prose Works*, 45), and the return to Platonism. Glanvill is a witness to the force of the Latitudinarians – the Cambridge Platonists – in the crucial period of the mid-seventeenth century. Glanvill shows that the deep influence of Bacon upon the period could be combined with theology and a frankly Platonizing metaphysics:

Moreover, it would allay the *admiration* of any one inquisitive in such researches, when he shall have taken notice of the starting up and prevailing of *School-Divinity* in the world which was but Aristotle's *Philosophy theologiz'd*. And we know that *Philosophy* had the luck to *swim* in the general *esteem* and *credit*, when *Platonism* and the more *antient wisdom*, a breach of which, *praeexistence*, was, were almost quite sunk and buried. So that a *Theology* being now made, out of *Aristotelian principles*, 'tis no wonder that *Praeexistence* was left out, nothing being supposed to have been said of it, by the great Author of that *Philosophy*; and his *admiring Sectators* were loath to borrow so considerable a *Theory*, from their Masters neglected Rival, *Plato*.

(Glanvill, *Lux Orientalis*, 43)

It is evident in the above passage that ancient theology is no mere antiquarian research for Glanvill, but inextricably linked to his philosophical Platonism. Cudworth's fine library of 2,500 volumes contained a large section of contemporary mathematical, medical and scientific works. Cudworth notes of Ficino that he 'lived before the restoration of this mechanical philosophy, and therefore understood it not' (*A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, 37).

²See the detailed study of Cudworth's relationship to Descartes by Gysi, *Platonism and Cartesianism*. On Cudworth's concept of self-consciousness, see Thiel, 'Cudworth and Seventeenth-century Theories of Consciousness'.

The curious historiography is not an exercise in the study of history but a rather convoluted justification for the fusion of atomism and Platonism. Ancient philosophy is discussed because of the contemporary significance of atomism, not least with the philosophical deployment of the new science by Hobbes and Descartes. Cudworth discusses Gassendi (see also TIS, I, 105) or Hobbes (TIS, I, 108–9) and explicitly refers to *res extensa* and ‘extended substance, body or matter in the philosophy of Descartes’ (TIS, I, 117–8).

In this paper I wish to expound and explain the significance of Cudworth’s ‘ancient theology’ and defend the view that it is inextricably related with his Platonism. It is well-known that the *prisca theologia* is a significant element in the Neoplatonic tradition. I wish to show that this notion, apparently so bizarre, is philosophically motivated; history and philology constitute Cudworth’s tools, yet the end is *philosophical*, that is ‘a diligent inquiry into the true and genuine sense of this Pagan polytheism’. The ‘mystery of pagan theology’ was that many of their gods are ‘several names and notions of one supreme Deity’, and his view is that the ‘generality of mankind’ has tended to theism (TIS, I, 144–5). The ancient theology manifests a particular philosophical strain in Cudworth’s thought. Furthermore, the apparently antiquarian interest in Egyptian theology can be shown to form a link between Cudworth and one of the key controversies of the late eighteenth century and thereby, one might add, the emergence of nineteenth century idealism: our appreciation of subsequent philosophical developments on the continent of Europe would be severely diminished if we failed to appreciate this connection and its significance for Cudworth.

The problem of ancient theology

The ancient theology is founded not upon an Abrahamic revelation but on that of Adam, Enoch, Noah or Moses. On this account, the Gentiles should have inherited truths from Noah or before. In this strand of Christian apologetics, Orpheus and Hermes Trismegistus and Pythagoras were viewed as the source of the ‘theology’ of Plato: monotheism, the Trinitarian Godhead, creation of the world through the Logos, the immortality of the soul. It relied upon attribution of antiquity to various late antique texts: the *Hermetica* or the Orphica, the Pythagorean Sibylline Prophecies. It is sometimes thought that Isaac Casaubon’s 1614 *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI* demolished it by showing that most of the *Corpus Hermeticum* belonged to the Christian era, but yet the tradition of Christian Hermeticism does not finish with Casaubon. Unlike Ficino’s *Theologia Platonica* (1469–74), Cudworth’s ancient theology is not dependent upon the Hermetic sources, but mounts an argument against Casaubon. Cudworth denies the claim that Greek materials are evidence against assigning an early date to the document. He argues that because ‘Pythagoreanism, Platonism and Greek Learning in

general, was in great part derived from the Egyptians, it cannot be concluded, that whatever is Platonical or Grecanical, therefore was not Egyptian' (TIS, I, 553).

A contemporary historian Dimitri Levitin, in his recent book *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science*, claims that we ought to abandon the 'broad framework' of this 'supposed group' and 'dispense with terms like *prisca theologia*' (Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 16). Levitin, moreover, speaks scornfully of Cudworth's 'putative Platonism' (TIS, 423), repeatedly asserts that it is misleading to employ the category of Cambridge Platonism, and argues for a real contrast between the scholarship of Cudworth and the whimsical and inaccurate musings of Henry More. Levitin censures the supposed link between ancient wisdom and philosophical Platonism, opposing that approach with that of professional scholarship and the use of expert continental philology like that of Scaliger, Causabon or Grotius:

Far from being the remnant of a 'Renaissance' 'Platonic' tradition, Cudworth was part of an advanced scholarly elite that approached the ancient world (including the philosophy of Plato and the Neoplatonists) through the tools offered by the European scholars of the first half of the seventeenth century.

(TIS, 544)

Levitin provides a welcome correction of the common view that Cudworth's dubious and anachronistic learning had been exposed by the brilliance of Richard Bentley, and Cudworth's philosophy was an anachronistic reversion to Ficino and Pico that could not survive the emergence of the new science (see Grafton, *Defenders of the Text*, 17–21). Levitin, however, goes too far in denying the existence of the 'Cambridge Platonists'. Cudworth and More embody a living tradition of Platonism, not slavishly 'Platonic', but continuing in the spirit rather than the letter of Platonism. Indeed, inspired by the challenge of Hobbes and Descartes, Cudworth and More, notwithstanding their differences, should be seen as assertors of the primacy of spiritual reality, both in the ethical sense of a dimension of reality transcending the purely material, and in the ethical-religious sense as the telos of human happiness.

Cudworth's systematic Platonism

It can be difficult for a modern reader to appreciate the significance of the title of Cudworth's great tome. It is a Platonic 'system'. Berkeley is relying upon the same notion of a Platonic system with his 1744 *Siris* or 'chain' of reality. Cudworth understands 'Platonism' to be a particular system of monotheism that constitutes a middle way between two flawed theological–metaphysical extremes: the pantheism of ancient and modern vitalists and the extreme transcendence of various theists who dislocate the Divine from the world. Cudworth presents the position of the 'Christian Platonist' or 'Platonic Christian', that is a Christian Neoplatonism, in which God is the incomprehensible

but not inconceivable self-existent source of all reality potential and actual, and whose goodness and holy presence has been experienced in various forms by pagans as well as by Christians.

Before dismissing Cudworth's system of Platonism as anachronistic, one might note that Lloyd Gerson in his recent book *From Plato to Platonism* has argued that Plato's own Platonism, so to speak, was produced out of a matrix he calls 'Ur-Platonism' (Lloyd Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism*, 9–19). On Gerson's account, Ur-Platonism is the key system of Platonism. It rests upon the conjunction of five robust refusals: the rejection of nominalism, mechanism, materialism, relativism and skepticism (*From Plato to Platonism*, 20). Gerson plausibly and powerfully represents Plato's philosophy as the endeavour to attempt to develop a coherent alternative to the various forms of skepticism, relativism, materialism, mechanism and nominalism that flourished in Antiquity and which remerged with great force in the Renaissance and Early Modern period. He adds that these five contradictories of Platonism 'form the matrix out of which are built the various forms of what is today called "naturalism"' (*From Plato to Platonism*, 307). Cudworth's position overlaps neatly with Gerson's approach. Through Hobbes' radical nominalism and mechanistic determinism, Cudworth could harness anew the ancient arguments employed by Platonists against Stoic materialism and Epicurean reductionism and the skepticism of Sextus, not least the problems linked to mind and causality. This is the age of Hobbes and Spinoza, and the much-vaunted atheism of these critics of traditional theism. Plato in the 10th book of the *Laws* presents mechanistic materialism, or what we would call reductive materialism, as the source of atheism. Plato's counterargument is that the harmony and order, i.e. the *techne* of the universe, cannot be the product of accident (*tuche*), and requires a governing mind. This is the position that Aristotle presents in Book 12 (Lambda) of his *Metaphysics*, as do all Platonists afterwards, not least Plotinus and Proclus. Only a top-down metaphysics, in the sense of a theological metaphysics can explain a genuinely intelligible universe.

The subtitle of *The True Intellectual System* is significant: *Wherein, all the reason and philosophy of atheism is confuted: and its impossibility demonstrated.* *The True Intellectual System* is concerned with the question of the existence of God, in which Cudworth endeavours to show that monotheism is natural to mankind, yet the confusion of atheism can be traced to very ancient sources. One of the quotations is from Book 10 of the *Laws*, 887d:

phere de, pos an tis me thumo legoi peri theon hos eisin? Ananke gar de chalepos pherein kai misein ekeinous hoi touton hemin aitioi ton logon gegenantai kai gignontai.

Well now, how is it possible, without getting angry, to argue for the existence of gods? Clearly, one necessarily gets cross and annoyed with these people who

put us to the trouble and continue to put us to the trouble of producing these explanations.

(*The Laws*, 414)

One might perhaps sense some of Cudworth's own frustration at the length of his own endeavour to defeat atheism, a target he depicts in dramatic terms as 'a certain strange kind of monster, with four heads, that are all of them perpetually biting, tearing, and devouring one another' (TIS, I, 143). The emergence of powerful critiques of theism in Hobbes and Spinoza and the development of Neo-Stoicism and Neo-Epicureanism drove Cudworth to the opinion that Plato was right to argue that the metaphysics of atheism needs to be challenged. Cudworth viewed the essential debate in the mid- to late-seventeenth century as an instance of Plato's perennial conflict of the Gods (friends of forms) and the giants (materialists) in the *Sophist* 246a–c:

Wherefore the same Plato tells us, that there had been always, as well, as then there was, a perpetual war and controversy in the world, and, as he calls it, a kind of gigantomachy betwixt these two parties or sects of men; the one, that held that there was no other substance in the world besides body; the other, that asserted incorporeal substance.

(TIS, I, 35)

Cudworth views all forms of atheism as emerging out of 'pneumatophobia' or 'a fear of spirit and a near superstitious reverence for matter as the only numen' (TIS, I, 200; see Kroll, *The Material Word*). The motivating question of the entire *True Intellectual System of the Universe* is whether matter should be understood as derived from mind or the other way around. The atheist position, and here Cudworth is agreeing with Plato's diagnosis of the atheist in Book 10 of the *Laws*, is that 'all animality, sense and consciousness, is a secondary, derivative and accidental thing, generable and corruptible, arising out of particular concretions of matter organized and dissolved together with them' (TIS, I, 202–3). The debate about atheism and theism is inextricably linked to the problem of the 'stubborn necessity of matter' (II, 594) and the claim that 'the divine Mind and Wisdom hath so printed its seal or signature upon the matter of the whole corporeal world, as that fortune and chance could never possibly have counterfeited the same' (I, 602).

Materialism seemed in part vindicated if nature could be explained in exclusively physical properties of location, shape and size without recourse to immaterial or spiritual causality. The radical Cartesian sundering of spirit and extension seemed to threaten the intelligibility and presence of the Divine. The existence of spirit on the Cartesian model, and indeed the supreme spiritual Divine substance, was thereby shut off from the physical world. Cudworth observes:

They make a kind of dead and wooden world, as it were a carved statue, that hath nothing vital nor magical at all in it. Whereas to those, who are

considerative, it will plainly appear, that there is a mixture of life or plastic nature, together with mechanism, which runs through the whole corporeal universe.
(TIS, I, 221)

The physical world is likened to a physical artefact, wholly distinct from its source and maker, or without any transcendent informing principle. Henry More is cited with a reference to his *Enchiridion Metaphysicum* as an expert defender of the thesis that 'all the effects of nature come to pass by material and mechanical necessity, or the mere fortuitous motion of matter, without any guidance or direction, is a thing no less irrational than it is impious and atheistical' (TIS, I, 220).

The upshot and conclusion of all is, that [according to the Atomists] there is no such scale or ladder in nature as Theists and Metaphysicians suppose, no degrees of real perfection and entity one above another, as of life and sense above inanimate matter, of reason and understanding above sense; from whence it would be inferred, that the order of things in nature was in way of descent from higher and greater perfection, downward to lesser and lower, which is indeed to introduce a God.

(TIS, III, 341)

It is not philology but metaphysics and theology that provides the motor of Cudworth's thought. He is intent on employing the riches of an ancient tradition in order to contribute to the debates of his own age. Philology is the *ancilla theologiae* and the aid to metaphysics. Other philosophers saw Cudworth as an expert guide. Locke endorsed the 'Accurateness and Judgement' of Cudworth's narrative of the 'Opinions of the Greek Philosophers' (Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 248; see also Hutton, 'Some Thoughts Concerning Ralph Cudworth', 146). Hume's *Natural History of Religion* is another example altogether. In the case of Hume history is employed in a manner diametrically opposed to Cudworth. For Hume, 'polytheism is the original religion of mankind' and Cudworth's genealogy of religion is turned on its head. Rather than history supporting 'orthodoxy', history becomes an organ of critique. And it is buttressed by Hume's naturalism: 'What a peculiar privilege has this little agitation of the brain which we call thought, that we must thus make it the model of the whole universe?' (Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, 50). Perhaps Hume was referring to Cudworth's 'system' in which the universe is intellectual or mind? Whether Hume is criticizing causation or received histories of monotheism, he may have been thinking of a passage like this:

Mind ... is a greater reality in nature ... the things, which belong to souls and minds, to rational beings as such, must not have less, but more reality in them, than the things in inanimate bodies ... it being impossible for a greater perfection to be produced from a lesser ... from whence things gradually descend downward, lower and lower, till they end in senseless matter.

(TIS, III, 434–5)

The issue for Cudworth is to provide rational explanation of the universe with a top-down causality that avoids the randomness of Epicurean and Neo-Epicurean theories of nature.

The problem of 'atheism' is a defining question for the Cambridge Platonists as a group. Henry More published his *Antidote Against Atheism* in 1652. Smith's *Select Discourses*, published posthumously in 1660, contains chapters on atheism or the soul's immortality, where he attacks 'the Epicurean herd', and presents the true metaphysical and contemplative man in whom the soul has already attained to communion with the Divine Nature (Smith, *Select Discourses*, 17). The splendid frontispiece of the 1678 first edition of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* constitutes a visual image of Cudworth's thesis (the engraving is by R. White after a painting by Jan Batista Caespers). On one side we see the 'Theists', including Socrates, Pythagoras and Aristotle, contemplating or gesturing towards the heavens. There is a wreath and a banner with the word 'Victory' on a column behind them. On the other side are the wilting atheistic ancients, Anaximander, Strato and Epicurus, appearing somewhat dejected and gazing downward. Next to them we see a crumbling wreath bearing the banner 'Confusion'. The presence of Pythagoras rather than Plato expresses what Gerson calls the Ur-Platonism thesis. Pythagoras was generally considered a cardinal representative of ancient theology, and Pythagoreans figure prominently in Plato, culminating in Timaeus presenting Plato's cosmology.

Much of the controversy depends upon the philosophical questions about the nature of mind and cause. One aspect of this is the acceptance of atomism or corpuscularianism. This is not an argument for claiming that Cudworth's 'Platonism' is diluted or misattributed. The sundering of atomism from Democritean fatalistic atheism was a central aim of the *True Intellectual System* (see also Clucas, 'Poetic Atomism in Seventeenth-century England'). Cudworth cites Posidonius, Sextus Empiricus and Strabo in attributing the doctrine of atomism to a Phoenician called Moschus and says that the first Greek atomist was Pythagoras. Democritus and Leucippus, however, took atomism as a materialistic theory. They 'derive the original of all things in the universe from senseless atoms ... so that there could not be any God' (TIS, I, 33–4). Interestingly, Cudworth was building on Pierre Gassendi's seminal work. Gassendi (1592–1652) was the key figure for the dissemination of Epicureanism in the seventeenth century. Levitin writes: 'The historiographical obsession with labelling Cudworth a Platonist has obscured the fact that the contemporary with whom he engaged most on the issue of matter theory was Gassendi' (Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 355). Levitin's failure to appreciate the philosophical dimension of Cudworth's enterprise is manifest: while it is true that Cudworth draws upon Gassendi's work, he is far from supporting the Frenchman. *Philosophically*, Cudworth is utterly opposed to Gassendi:

We may observe the Fraud and Juggling of *Gassendus*, who ... extols and applauds *Epicurus*, as one who approached nearer to Christianity than the other Philosophers, in that he denied the World to be an animal; whereas according to the language and Notions of those times, to deny the Worlds animation, and to be an Atheist or to deny a God, was one and the same thing.
(TIS, II, 175)

One might note that Cudworth accuses Gassendi of 'Fraud and Juggling' and that his near atheism was cognate with his denial of the animating presence of the Divine in the world. Exposing important part-truths from his opponents' positions, Cudworth evinced his key hermeneutical principle that 'All great errors have ever been intermingled with some truth' (*True Notion of the Lord's Supper*, 1).

Nature, transcendent causality and divine will

For those who view Neoplatonism as essentially pantheistic, or with greater justification, polytheistic, Cudworth's argument seems perplexing, and hence we need to clarify the distinctively 'Neoplatonic dimension' in Cudworth. Le Clerc, in a defence of Cudworth, noted that:

Cudworth also correctly and excellently remarks that the being, whose property it is to make another being commence its existence, must not only be possessed of all the perfections which the being produced by it is supposed to enjoy; but must also have a power of action by which it can be the cause of something.
(*Le Clerc's Observations*, in TIS, III, 134)

Divine goodness is conscious creative and salvific agency in a univocal sense in contradistinction to Spinoza's abstract thought/extension substance. On the other hand, the theism advocated in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* is distinct from the 'mechanic theism' of Descartes. Cudworth is the inheritor and exponent of a form of Neoplatonic theism that could be called 'mystical monotheism' (I am using the terminology of Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*). The Platonic ideas for Cudworth are causal powers in the Divine intellect: 'Ideas, that is, forms, exemplars and causes of all these natural and sensible things' (TIS, II, 350). Platonism offers for Cudworth a model of a proper balance between transcendence and immanence. The cosmos participates in and reflects its transcendent source and yet cannot be identified with the transcendent principle.

Plotinus, Scotus Eriugena and Eckhart would all downplay *creatio ex nihilo* in favour of *creatio ex Deo*. The whole world is *Deus explicatus* (see also TIS, I, 515). Cudworth's discussion of the 'Pagan Theists' and 'Theologers' should include some consideration of the thorny problem of the metaphors of procession or influx or emanation. The much-used (but little understood) word 'emanation' does not correspond to any one Greek philosophical term but a group (some might say cloud) of metaphors in Plotinus and other

Neoplatonists (usually of light, water or seeds). The roots of this language lie in the materialistic Stoic theory of the fiery breath that comes from and returns to the sun. Plotinus, however, always rejects the pantheistic implications of such Stoic language. It is the correspondence or analogy between the *kosmos noetos* and the *kosmos aisthetos* that is crucial. It is important to bear in mind the distinction between the intelligible cosmos (*kosmos noetos*, sometimes *noetikos*, Latin: *mundus intelligibilis*) and the physical cosmos (*kosmos aisthetos*, Latin: *mundus sensibilis*). This contrast between an intelligible world and the physical cosmos is of Platonic provenance, and was firmly established in Middle Platonism, drawing especially upon Plato's *Timaeus* 27d–47e. The *kosmos noetikos* is the eternal world of ideas, while the *kosmos aisthetos* is the image of that in the changing physical world. In medieval philosophy the *Book of Causes* (*Liber de causis*), and the manifold commentaries written on it, employs the language of procession, influx or emanation. Cudworth wishes to sustain the vision of a universe originating in its transcendent Cause and suffused with the energy of that First Cause into the lower levels of Being as 'radii Deitatis' and 'rays of the Deity' (TIS, I, 515). 'God expanded or unfolded, and ... they call the creatures, as St. Jerome and others often do, *radios Deitatis*, "the rays of the Deity"' (TIS, III, 80–1).³

The Neoplatonic structure of Cudworth's thought, as opposed to some more generic 'Platonism', can be seen in the stress upon the following four tenets of 'emanative power to create'. These can be listed as:

1. Procession or causality is a movement from the greater to the lesser:

'In the things Generated from Eternity, or Produced by way of natural Emanation, there is no progress upwards, but all Downwards, and still a Gradual Descent into Greater Multiplicity ... That which is Generated or Emaneth, immediately from the First and Highest Being, is not the very same thing with it, as if it were nothing but that Repeated again and Ingeminated; and as it is not same, so neither can it be Better than it [Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5, Bk 3, chp 15].' From whence it follows, that it must needs be Gradually subordinate and Inferiour to it.

(TIS, II, 391)

Cudworth refers explicitly to Plotinus but equally he could have taken this from Proclus:

Accordingly every cause properly so called, inasmuch as it both is more perfect than that which proceeds from it [prop. 7] and itself furnishes the limits of its production, transcends the instruments, the elements, and in general all that is described as a by-cause.

(*Elements of Theology*, 73)

³Dr Adrian Mihai observes that the quote regarding the *radii deitatis* seems to come from Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones Super Cantica*, Sermo 31, and not from Jerome, as Cudworth reports.

2. That which processes from its source is both *like* and *unlike* its originator. The Wisdom of God furnishes 'its Stamps and Signatures every where throughout the World' (TIS, III, 597) or 'Nature is not the Divine Art Archetypal but Ectypal' (I, 281).

The natural order, for Cudworth, is reflecting its transcendent source, both distinct from its origin and yet participating in it.

3. The reflection in the effect of the cause is present since the effect is coterminous with the transcendent cause, just as the mirrored image depends upon the presence of its source. Cudworth says that:

the Plastick life of Nature is but the mere Umbrage of Intellectuality, a faint and shadowy Imitation of Mind and Understanding; upon which it doth as Essentially depend, as the Shadow doth upon the Body, the Image in the Glass upon the Face, or the Echo upon the Original Voice.

(TIS, I, 172)

4. The Source remains unreduced by its procession. The frequent misunderstanding of Neoplatonism as pantheism rests upon the failure to appreciate this point. Cudworth writes of God as the 'fountain of love and goodness' (III, 463) and as 'fountain of life and understanding' (III, 453). Yet the Divine is not abated by its procession. In part Cudworth sees this through the doctrine of divine ideas. The mind of God contains all that is and can be, and is the noetic paradigm of the physical cosmos:

The Mind of God is nothing but the intelligible essences of things, or their natures as conceivable, and objects of the mind ... So that the true meaning of these eternal essences is indeed no other than this, that knowledge is eternal; or that there is an eternal mind that comprehendeth the intelligible natures and ideas of all things, whether actually existing or possible only, their necessary relations to one another, and all the immutable verities belonging to them ... that there is one eternal unmade Mind and perfect incorporeal Deity, a real and substantial Ghost or Spirit, which comprehending itself, and all the extent of its own power, the possibility of things, and their intelligible natures, together with an exemplar or platform of the whole world, produced the same accordingly.

(TIS, III, 401)

Proclus might seem like a philosophical apologist for Greek polytheism and an unlikely ally for Cudworth. Cudworth is not without some criticism of Proclus 'who had some peculiar fancies and whimsies of his own, and was indeed a confounder of the Platonic Theology, and a mingler of much unintelligible stuff with it' (III, 510). Yet Cudworth's use of Proclus, or the *Liber de causis*, a work based upon Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth century, and attributed to Aristotle, has its justification.

Proclus' vision of intelligible deities, his 'henadology', constitutes a level of reality subordinate to the ineffable and unparticipated One. There is a hierarchy of perfection and a gradual descent from the greater to the less. Moreover, the effect participates in the cause like the image in the archetype (see ed. Calma, *Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages: I. New Commentaries on Liber de causis*).

Just as the cosmos is a 'signature of the divine wisdom' (TIS I, 238), a theophany of the transcendent Principle, so too the different religions are all reflections of a true monotheism. Similarly the figmenta of the poets and the 'several names and notions' of the gods are reflections 'of one supreme Numen' (see also TIS I, 364). This is the result of Cudworth's 'diligent inquiry into the true and genuine sense of this pagan polytheism' (TIS, I, 320). The artificial idea of God which can be found in polytheism is thus to be contrasted with the 'true sense of pagan polytheism' (TIS, II, 144–5). Cudworth's defence of divine immanence and omnipresence against the mechanical theists implies that the light of divine goodness has been perceived by 'theologers' and metaphysicians, even when occluded by 'physiologers' and atheists (TIS, III, 93).

Within the context of seventeenth-century Cambridge and the doctrine of scholastic Calvinism, Cudworth's latitudinarian interest in the theology of the pagans stands in contrast to the explicit doctrine of exclusive salvation within the Christian Church: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Such was the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 that 'the visible Church ... is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation'. The ethos and doctrines of the Westminster Assembly was the Calvinism expressed in the Protestant scholastic William Perkins' *On Predestination* of 1598. This was the 'dry systematical way of those times' conveyed in a work which was more influential in Cambridge and the Church of England than even Hooker.

Cudworth came from the Puritan/Calvinist stable of Emmanuel College. However, he clearly came to question the dark Augustinianism of the Calvinist creed and turned to the liberal Christian tradition of Origen and Erasmus rather than the sombre predestinarianism of the Bishop of Hippo and his 'Dark thoughts concerning the deity' (TIS, I, 315). Cudworth's theology is also opposed to the strong covenant theology particular to the Reformed tradition. The appeal to an ancient theology is tied to a view of salvation that extends far beyond the bounds of the covenant with the Hebrews. This theology is in the spirit of the Christianity of Justin Martyr, and Clement and Origen of Alexandria. In such a theology, Christianity expands the wisdom of mankind but it does not abrogate it. We cannot attribute anything to God that is not worthy of his supreme goodness. Divine Essence has priority over Divine Will in the sense that 'Goodness and justice in God are always complicated together' (TIS, 3, 494). In Acts 17:28 St Paul is said to have spoken to pagan Greek philosophers about the God 'in whom we live, and move, and have

our being' (Paul quotes a line from the poem *Kretika* by Epimenides of Crete). If the Bible itself is attesting to monotheism among the pagans, this itself is an incentive for a Christian Platonist like Cudworth to pursue this path.

The epitaph of *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* means that our humanity is to be elevated not destroyed or reduced by true religion. This is latitudinarianism. The classification of 'Cambridge Platonists' is helpful in designating this strand of speculative Christian humanism that draws explicitly upon Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic strands. Origen's *Contra Celsum* VI 13 is used as an epigraph at the beginning of the *True Intellectual System*: 'Human wisdom is the exercise of the soul but divine wisdom is the purpose'. Human wisdom is a means to that end which is knowledge of Divine truths. Faith is not in conflict with religion, but with superstition and materialism. The first point is that Cudworth presents the conflict as one between theism and atheism, and not – as more orthodox theists would be inclined – between the true religion and idolatry. And the argument is for the priority of monotheism among the great cultures.

Secondly, why the Egyptian Origen? William Spencer, fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, published an annotated and corrected Latin edition of Origen's *Contra Celsum* in 1658. The mid-seventeenth century was a period of great admiration for Origen. More spoke of him as the 'Miracle of the Christian World' (More, 'The Preface General', xxii; see the very useful discussion by Patrides, *Premises and Motifs in Renaissance Thought and Literature*, 213). In opposition to the severity of Augustine, Origen betokened a more universalistic theology predicated upon human freedom and dignity rather than depravity, and on the goodness of God rather than arbitrary Divine fiat.

Whether of these two hypotheses concerning God, one of the ancient pagan philosophers, that God is as essentially goodness as wisdom, or, as Plotinus after Plato calls him, decency and fitness itself; the other, of some late professors of Christianity, that he is nothing but arbitrary will, omnipotent and omniscient; I say, whether of these two is more agreeable to piety and true Christianity, we shall leave it to be considered.

(TIS, II, 88)

It should be noted that the appeal to 'ancient theology' has the effect of diluting any Christian exceptionalism and claims to a singular and exclusive revelation. While Platonists like Cudworth and More were not deists, it is clear why they could be associated with the aims and interests of those wishing to critique the very idea of a unique and *sui generis* revelation. In contemporary language, these latitudinarians were theological liberals, and the opposition to predestination and the fondness and sympathy to 'pagan' thought reflects this.

Hence the question is not merely the conflict between theism and atheism joined to the problem of mind. It is also about the *kind* of theism at stake. As

Lutz Bergemann has recently argued, Cudworth's metaphysics is a philosophy of *power*: God, as Plotinus insists, is *dunamis panton*, the power and source of all and to all and yet is not arbitrary power (Bergemann, *System aus Transformation*). Indeed Cudworth explicitly uses Plotinus' magnificent treatise *On the Freedom and the Will of the One*. In this remarkably theistic treatise, the causal source of the physical cosmos is the immaterial abounding transcendent cause and is also presented through the image of the King (*ho basileus*). Plotinus writes:

It is this, then, and not something else, but what it ought to be; it did not happen to be like this, but had to be like this; but this 'had to be' is principle of all things that had to be [*Touto oun kai ouk allo, all' hoper echren einai; ou toinun houto sunebe, all' edei houtos; houto de 'edei' touto arche ton hosa edei*].
(*Enneads* VI 8, 15)⁴

Cudworth adds *theos* to the Greek. The passage reads:

theos hoper echren einai; ou toinun houto sunebe, all' edei houtos; houto de 'edei' touto arche ton hosa edei: God is essentially that, which ought to be; and he therefore did not happen to be such as he is: and this first ought to be the principle of all things whatsoever that ought to be.
(TIS, III, 463)

One might legitimately object to Cudworth's resolutely harnessing Plotinus to the theistic camp, but Cudworth can draw upon a precedent in Ficino and others identifying the supreme principle that is both transcendent and immanent in the cosmos with the Christian Godhead (for Ficino's momentous synthesis of Plotinian metaphysics and Christian theology, see his *Platonic Theology*). The supreme being is absolute freedom but this is not to be understood in a crude anthropomorphic manner: 'God's will is ruled by his justice, and not his justice ruled by his will; and therefore God himself cannot command what is in its own nature unjust' (TIS, III, 494. See also III, 512). Indeed, the mistake of the atheists is to confuse this anthropomorphism with the genuine concept of God:

In the next place, this wish of Atheists is altogether founded upon a mistaken notion of God Almighty too ... His will is not mere will, such as hath no other reason besides itself; but it is law, equity, and chancery.
(III, 494).

This is not the voluntaristic power of the ultra-Calvinistic deity but 'the abounding fecund energy' that is the *metron panton* or measure of all that is both 'measureless to man' while the gauge and boundary of Being (*omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti*, 'Thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight', Wisdom 11:20). (See

⁴For discussion, see Leroux's in Plotin, *Traité Sur la Liberté*, 305.

W. Beierwaltes, 'Augustins Interpretation von Sapientia 11:21'.) While 'some fanatics of latter times 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' (TIS, I, 513), there is no diminishing of the cause in its procession into the physical cosmos. The Cause, while not exhausted or lessened by its procession, remains within its effect. Yet the paradigm of divine immanence, Cudworth insists, is 'a very ticklish point and easily liable to mistake and abuse' (TIS, I, 515). While we do not know for certain whether Cudworth would have read Spinoza's *Ethics*, with its strident *Deus sive natura*, it is most likely that he was apprised of its existence by Van Limborch, and Cudworth mentions Spinoza in the *True Intellectual System* as 'that Late Theological Politician ... writing against miracles' (III, 4; see also J. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 152).⁵ Sections of Spinoza's *Ethics* were in circulation in 1663, and a full draft by 1665 (see also Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 225).

Cudworth and the idealist legacy

The influence of the Cambridge Platonists upon the poets and Romantic essayists in Britain has been well documented (see also Cisternino, *Natura e anima nel pensiero di Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 32ff.). In Coleridge, the link with Cudworth is explicit:⁶

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

(Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp')

The 'Plastic ... intellectual breeze' pervading nature is the spirit of nature as the image of the presence of the Divine as that transcendent ultimately Simple (Hen) while also being immanent in the Many (Pan), and this is:

because the world produced by God, and really existing without him, is not therefore quite cut off from him, nor subsists alone by itself as a dead thing, but is still livingly united to him, essentially dependent upon him, always supported and upheld, quickened and enlivened, acted and pervaded by him.

(TIS, I, 515)

Cudworth's scholarly prowess and good sense guaranteed his influence on the continent during the eighteenth century. The eminent Egyptologist Jan

⁵Adrian Mihai notes that Cudworth possibly quotes the beautiful expression *ignorantiae asylum* from Spinoza's *Ethics* I, Appendix, in TIS II, 562 and 588.

⁶For discussion of Coleridge as an exponent and developer of Cudworth's philosophy, see Cristine Flores, 'Contemplant Spirits'.

Assmann has written appreciatively about Cudworth's exploration of ancient theology. Assmann presents Cudworth as the most significant source of eighteenth-century speculation upon the vicissitudes of monotheism and polytheism in pre-Christian ancient Egypt. Egyptologists tend to spurn antique Hellenic or Renaissance accounts of Egyptian religion since they predate Jean-François Champollion's momentous decipherment of the Rosetta Stone in 1822. However, Assmann claims that 'The hieroglyphic texts confirm Cudworth's intuitions in every way he could have desired' (Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 90). Assmann thinks that many of the ideas of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are, in fact, continuous with ancient Egyptian sources. It is significant for our purposes to note, as we will stress later, that Origen of Alexandria (185–254 AD) is an important source for Cudworth. For his thesis of an 'Arcane Theology wherein are disguised Mysterious Truths in the form of enigmatic Fables and Allegories' Cudworth refers to Origen (see also *Moses the Egyptian*, 90). Cudworth also quotes another Egyptian Platonist, Clement of Alexandria (c.150–215 BC):

The Egyptians do not reveal their Religious Mysteries promiscuously to all, nor communicate the knowledge of divine things to the Profane, but only to those judged most fitly qualified for the same, upon account both of their birth and Education.

(TIS, I, 421; discussed in Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 83)

Another Platonist, Plutarch (c. 46–120 BC), is cited as a further witness to the 'Arcane and Enigmatical Wisdom' of the ancient Egyptian monotheists. Cudworth draws upon the work of Thomas Gale of Trinity College, Cambridge, in an edition of the *De Mysteriis* of the Divine 'Iamblichus'. Amun was 'not only the name of the *Supreme Deity*, but also of such a one that was *Hidden, Invisible and Incorporeal*' and he links the hidden god to the 'veiled image of Sais' (Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 86). The issue for Cudworth is one of monotheism. It is for Cudworth indeed an 'arcane monotheism, obscured by subtle hieroglyphs and allegorical husk', but monotheism it is. On Cudworth's account, the true Orphic-Egyptian monotheism is not pantheistic: He is explicitly opposed to what he designates as 'Cosmo-plastic or Stoical Atheism' (TIS, I, 214, and 217).

Assmann is concerned with the bearing between the monotheism of fourteenth century BC Akhenaten and biblical monotheism, or between biblical theism and what Assmann calls 'cosmotheism', by which he means a composite of Stoicism, Neoplatonism, Spinozism and Freemasonry (Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 142). Cudworth plays a foundational role in this narrative. Assmann quite properly sees the ideas in the *Corpus Hermeticum* fused with Spinoza and Freemasonry as playing a decisive role in European intellectual history. Cudworth's argument is that the hermetic materials possibly have genuine roots in Egyptian thought transmitted through Hellenistic sources.

However, here Assmann is mistaken in viewing Cudworth as a precursor of Deism or pantheism, which Assmann designates as 'cosmotheism', and which Cudworth in fact opposes. Cudworth explicitly rejects the idea that matter is self-sufficient. This Stoic materialism is cognate with the foundational error of Stoicism that matter can generate mind without a transcendent intellect superior to the world. This is also linked to the monstrous error of determinism. As an Origenist (and Plotinian) Cudworth radically opposes Stoic determinism. Cudworth's own adherence is to a dialectic of immanence and transcendence: a Platonic *via media* between radical transcendence and Stoic immanence.

Assmann notes Cudworth's claim in the *True Intellectual System* for a 'primitive monotheism, common to all religions and philosophies, including atheism itself' (*Moses the Egyptian*, 81). Cudworth's argument depends upon the denial of a plurality of 'unmade and self-existent' gods. The ancient pagans held that there is only one unmade and self-existent god, who is the source of all beings – including 'native and mortal gods'. Cudworth refers to them as 'many unmade self-existent deities' (TIS, I, 322). This applies to late Greek polytheism (Hesiod to Julian), the Sibylline oracles, Zoroastrianism, the Chaldean Oracles, and Orphism; indeed 'the generality of Greekish Pagans, acknowledged one universal and all-comprehending Deity, one that was all; and consequently could not admit of many self-existent and independent deities' (TIS, I, 517). Assmann goes so far as to say that:

The problem that Cudworth was addressing in his *True Intellectual System* was the problem of atheism. Without even mentioning the name of Spinoza it is clear who was the addressee of this 'confutation.' Cudworth was trying to launch a debate which did not really break out until a century later ... the pantheism debate ... was the very formula by which Cudworth chose to characterize Egypt's arcane theology that triggered the famous conflict between Jacobi and Mendelssohn and heavily influenced German and English pre-Romanticism. This formula was *Hen kai Pan*, One and All.

(*Moses the Egyptian*, 80–1)

It should be noted once more that this is no mere antiquarian obsession. The philosophical target is the Cartesian model of the cosmos as an inanimate mechanism. In a sense Cudworth's retrieval of Egyptian theology served to buttress his own invective against the errors of Cartesianism.

And it is that inscription upon the temple at Sais; *Ego eimi pan to gegonos kai on kai esomenon, kai ton emon peplon oudeis po thnetos apekalupsen*, 'I am all that hath been, is, and shall be, and my *peplum* or veil no mortal hath ever yet uncovered.' Which though perhaps some would understand thus, as if that Deity therein described were nothing but the senseless matter of the whole corporeal universe ... yet it is plain, that this could not be the meaning of this inscription ... Again, in the Deity here described, there is both a veil or outside, and also something hidden and recondite; the sense seeming to be this: I am all that

was, is, and shall be; and the whole world is nothing but myself veiled; but my naked and unveiled brightness no mortal could ever yet behold or comprehend.
(TIS, I, 576)

Levitin suggests that this is an exercise in history rather than philosophy. Cudworth 'reconstructed not an esoteric philosophy but a broad cultural history of a superstitious yet nonetheless philosophically curious and monotheistic people'. He 'saw himself not as a reviver of antiquated Renaissance scholarly traditions but as a partaker in the conclusions of the latest research' (Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom*, 175). Yet any opposition between 'scholar' and 'philosopher' is anachronistic and misleading. Plotinus, one of the most audacious and speculative philosophers in the Western tradition, thinks of himself as a hermeneutical philosopher, merely expounding what *divus Plato* 'said'. Plotinus is quite happy to dismiss Longinus as a mere philologist, not as a philosopher (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, ch. 14). When Proclus said that Plotinus was 'the great exegete of the Platonic revelation' (Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne* I 1, p. 6; eds. H.D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink), he was not denying his philosophical prowess. Moreover, Plotinus was an Alexandrian and we should remember the role of Alexandria in the creation of scholarship. This was the city with its great library and culture of the collection of texts and historiography and also of fusion with Judaism (Philo). Tulloch and others were correct to view the spirit of Alexandria as a key to the humanism of the Cambridge Platonists. Platonism has played a significant role in the study of religion since the appeal to the spermatic logos of the Alexandrian Church Fathers up to Nicholas of Cusa's '*religio una in rituum varietate*' in *De Pace Fidei* (many varieties of rites but one religion) or Ficino's *De Christiana Religione* (1474): 'All opinions of men, all their responses, all their customs, change except *religio*'. The rites are all imperfect attempts at the ideal. The latitude of *De Religione Gentilium* of Edward Herbert can be seen in this strand of thought.⁷

Cudworth is arguing against atheism by means of an exploration of theism as the metaphysical 'default option' when not obscured by degenerate forms or corruptions of theism in the guise of polytheism or pantheism: the view of those 'who are strictly and properly called Theists, who affirm, that a perfectly conscious understanding being, or mind, existing of itself from eternity, was the cause of all other things' (TIS, I, 297). Cudworth wishes to challenge the view that polytheism is the norm of human cultures: 'because all the nations of the world heretofore (except a small and inconsiderable handful of the Jews) together with their wisest men and greatest philosophers, were generally look'd upon as *Polytheists*' (TIS I, 319). This theory of a transcendent causal first principle confirms this. According to Cudworth, this theory

⁷On the Cambridge Platonists' reception of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, notably his concepts of knowledge and religion, see Cope, *Joseph Glanvill*, 71–2; Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 164–93; and Lagrée, 'Lumière naturelle'.

emerges as enjoying remarkable continuity of esteem among the great nations. This *consensus gentium* (agreement of the nations) or 'continuity of esteem' argument was attacked in the following century but it is naïve to think that this historico-philosophical claim was defeated and dismissed easily by Hume.

The Cambridge Platonists constitute a decisive link between Platonism, especially in its late Renaissance form, and the speculative philosophy of German Idealism (see Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus*, 83–201. See also Vieillard-Baron, *Platonisme et interpretation de Platon a l'époque modern*, 31–44). Hegel liked to present Jakob Böhme as the other great philosophical influence upon modernity alongside Descartes. Böhme is undoubtedly a part of that Platonic influence that pervades eighteenth-century German thought (Muratori, *The First German Philosophy: The Mysticism of Jacob Böhme as Interpreted by Hegel*). Böhme's obscure style and perplexing reasoning casts some doubt upon the place that Hegel accords him in his pantheon of philosophical figures. Cudworth's monumental historiography was admired by leading scholars of the eighteenth century, like the 'German Erasmus', Lorenz von Mosheim (1693–1755), celebrated theologian and chancellor of the University of Göttingen (v. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* I, 29). Yet these great scholars from Mosheim to Tiedemann understood the profoundly Platonic aspect of Cudworth's cast of mind. The Latin translation of Lorenz von Mosheim as *Radulphi Cudworthi, Systema intellectuale hujus universi* was published in Jena in 1733 and then republished in Leiden in 1773 with Mosheim's highly critical notes. Mosheim was a follower of Leibniz and critical of Cudworth's Neoplatonism. As late as 1796 the distinguished German historian of philosophy Dietrich Tiedemann could write of Cudworth as a writer:

who alongside his rich experience of the world and an even more pronounced independence of intellect, and his repudiation of the Aristotelian yoke, enjoys the merit of having worked out the most thorough history of philosophy, even though his fondness for the Neoplatonists led him to place too much confidence in them, and to view the most ancient philosophy of Greece through their guidance.

(Tiedemann, *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie*, VI, 493. My translation)

It was through the prism of Mosheim's edition of Cudworth, in particular, that we find one of the most intriguing instances of the influence of the Cambridge Platonists upon Classical German philosophy. Cudworth was read as part of the theological–philosophical curriculum by Hegel and Schelling at the University of Tübingen (Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platon-Studien*, 21–8).

German Idealism emerged out of a controversy known as the 'Pantheismusstreit' or the Pantheism conflict. As Assmann's seminal work on the legacy of Egyptology in the eighteenth century and beyond stresses, it was occasioned by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's scandalous 'revelation' that

Lessing had admitted that he could not relish the orthodox concept of the deity and had been converted to the *hen kai pan* (one and All) of Spinozism. *Hen kai pan* became the slogan of the radical new view of Nature, Spirit and God among the post-Kantians (Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 140). Through Bayle and Le Clerc's controversy about Plastic Nature and Mosheim's translation of the *True Intellectual System*, Cudworth remained an influence on the continent throughout the eighteenth century and it is little wonder that Coleridge claimed that there was a genial coincidence between him and Schelling. The later phase of Schelling's philosophy, his *Philosophy of Revelation* and his *Philosophy of Mythology* could be seen as exercises in ancient theology *mutatis mutandis* (see also Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis*, 731ff). The relation between the coordinates of Being (*Sein*), Mind (*Geist*) and Revelation (*Offenbarung*) dominates the thought of the later Schelling, as it did for his erstwhile roommate in Tübingen, Hegel. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* cover much the same territory, albeit with his own distinctive cast of thought and metaphysical commitments. It is perhaps at least in part due to Mosheim's seminal translation of the learned Dr Cudworth that the two great Swabian Idealists endeavoured to produce their own true intellectual systems of the universe.

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