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Alexander X. Douglas

SPINOZA & DUTCH CARTESIANISM

Philosophy and Theology



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Introduction

This book aims to understand Spinoza's philosophy by situating it in its immediate historical context. It defends a thesis about Spinoza's philosophical motivations and then bases an interpretation of his major works upon it. The thesis is that much of his philosophy was conceived with the express purpose of rebutting a claim about the limitations of philosophy made by some of his contemporaries. They held that philosophy is intrinsically incapable of revealing anything of any relevance to theology, or in fact to any study with direct practical applications to human life. Spinoza did not. He believed that philosophy reveals the true nature of God, and that God is nothing like what the majority of theologians, or indeed of religious believers in general, think he is. The practical implications of this change in the concept of God were profound and radical. Many of his theories were directed towards showing how the separation his opponents endeavoured to maintain between philosophical and non-philosophical (particularly theological) thought was logically untenable.

Interest in Spinoza's philosophy has grown lately, and several works examining how his political and intellectual environment influenced his political writings have recently appeared.¹ I hope to show that the influence of this environment also governed the formation of his broader philosophical ideas. Studying this influence can help us to understand his

¹ See, for instance, Wiep van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza: An Essay on Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Steven M. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Tammy Nyden-Bullock, *Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind* (London: Continuum, 2007); Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

philosophy in new ways.² I do not mean to suggest that the debates I present here are the only ones of relevance to understanding Spinoza's position. Nor do I aim to present a general overview of the range of views that formed the general background to his philosophy. Rather, I propose that one particular debate weighed heavily upon his mind as he developed his philosophy and aim to show why this is so. If other scholars feel that I have overlooked other debates and authors of crucial relevance, the appropriate response is to provide their own research to fill in the gaps rather than making the faulty inference that whatever I do not mention I thereby claim to be unimportant. I can only hope that such future work will complement mine more than it overturns it.

The basic outline of my story is as follows. Many of Spinoza's contemporaries in the Dutch Republic were involved in a debate concerning the relation between philosophy and theology. The debate was not entirely new, but when Descartes introduced his new methodology and ideas into philosophy it took on a new importance. A number of philosophy and theology professors were impressed by Descartes' innovations. Some of them proposed to make Cartesianism the official philosophy taught in the universities, which forced them into the debate about the relations—or, as they would have it, the lack of relations—between philosophy and theology. The strongest opposition to their project came from orthodox theologians and defenders of the older Aristotelian philosophy, who argued that Cartesian philosophy should not be allowed into the universities. Cartesianism has, they argued, heterodox implications and could threaten the piety of those who were exposed to it. The group of Cartesian professors (I follow Theo Verbeek in referring to them as 'the Dutch Cartesians', although there were other Cartesians in the Dutch Republic with different views on this matter) found that their most effective strategy in responding to this opposition was to argue that philosophy and theology are entirely separate and mutually independent subjects. Beyond this, they aimed to defend the independence of philosophy from what were

² I have published a few articles promoting this thesis, among others: Alexander Douglas, 'Christoph Wittich's *Anti-Spinoza*', *The Intellectual History Review* 24, no. 2 (2014); Alexander Douglas, 'Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology', *Journal for the History of Philosophy* 51, no. 4 (2013); Alexander Douglas, 'Was Spinoza a Naturalist?' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (Forthcoming).

known as the ‘higher faculties’ in general, including not only theology but also medicine and jurisprudence.

Spinoza’s philosophical career can be understood as an attempt to undermine this argument using Descartes’ own ideas, though sometimes he drew different logical conclusions from them. Spinoza believed the thesis of the Dutch Cartesians, that philosophy is independent of the higher faculties, to be false, however politically convenient it may have been for them. His major publications all helped to advance this claim. In them he drew conclusions of profound relevance to theology, none of them remotely acceptable to the religious authorities, from Cartesian premises. He also revealed the deficiencies in the various arguments that Dutch Cartesians had employed to defend their separation thesis.

I aim to interpret a large portion of Spinoza’s philosophical *oeuvre* in order to show how centred it is on the project of replying to the Dutch Cartesians. I restrict myself to those works that Spinoza both completed and sought to publish in his lifetime, with the exception of the *Ethics*, which he would most likely have sought to publish (though no doubt anonymously) had he lived a little longer. Spinoza’s other works strike me as unreliable guides to his considered opinions—more so than they seem to strike other scholars, including even the Dutch Cartesians, as will become apparent. But my main reason for restricting myself in this way is merely to control the volume of text under discussion. I work rather slowly, and if I had aimed to cover more texts than I have the book would probably never have been finished. Again, I make no pronouncement that all scholarship on this topic must cease once my book has been published and am very pleased for any gaps I have left to be filled, rather than resented, by other scholars.

The outline of my argument and its division into chapters is as follows.

1 The Utrecht Crisis: Natural Theology and Cartesianism

This chapter provides the background to the development of the Dutch Cartesian position. It recounts how one of Descartes’ earliest followers, the professor of medicine Henricus Regius, caused a scandal within Utrecht University by promoting a Cartesian approach to physics. This involved denying the Scholastic theory of substantial forms. Yet this

theory played a key role in upholding a form of natural theology that was highly regarded by powerful orthodox Calvinist theologians. Chief among these was Gisbertus Voetius, the powerful rector and professor of theology at Utrecht. He aimed to defend the older natural theology, which drew heavily upon Aristotle and Scriptural interpretation, and which was known as ‘Mosaic Physics’. In Cartesianism Voetius and others saw the threatening origins of a different, far more heretical system of natural theology.

2 The Dutch Cartesians and the Separation Thesis

This chapter shows how the Dutch Cartesians responded to the Voetians by arguing that theology and philosophy belong to completely independent domains of knowledge. Natural theology was for them an illegitimate conflation between two separate and independent sciences. This meant that there was no possibility of a Cartesian natural theology, heretical or otherwise. It also, of course, meant that Mosaic Physics was based on a mistaken understanding of philosophy and theology.

The Dutch Cartesians took the demonstration of the mutual independence of philosophy and theology—and thus the impossibility of natural theology—to be one of the primary achievements of Descartes’ method. Cartesian method requires that all knowledge-claims that are not backed up by clear and distinct ideas be judged invalid for philosophy, *but not for other disciplines*. A great deal of the knowledge indispensable for the higher faculties is, they argued, not based on clear and distinct ideas. Philosophical method can thus be of no use in these subjects. Nor, however, can it be used to undermine the knowledge-claims made in such subjects. In this way the Dutch Cartesians supported a separation thesis in which philosophy and theology belong in two independent categories of enquiry with no possible overlap of the distinctive methodologies or beliefs required within each.

Soon the political leaders, responding to the controversies aroused in part by the introduction of Cartesianism, enjoined philosophy professors to teach philosophy in a way that did not interfere at all with the teaching of theology. This was effectively to take the side of the Dutch Cartesians, since they claimed that it was both possible and desirable to

teach philosophy in such a way, whereas Voetius and his followers claimed that it was not.

Crucial for the Dutch Cartesian separation thesis was a distinction that Voetius had denied and Descartes had affirmed, between the will and the intellect. The intellect, according to Descartes, is the mental faculty that presents ideas to be either affirmed or denied by the will. Drawing on this theory, the Dutch Cartesians argued that the will affirms only what follows from clear and distinct ideas in philosophy, whereas in the higher faculties it affirms more than this. The will must therefore be independent of the intellect and free to make its affirmations and denials in different ways, depending on context. This is significant for a later chapter, where Spinoza's amendment to Descartes' theory, involving the denial of this distinction, is discussed.

3 *The Metaphysical Thoughts*

This chapter explains how the existence of Cartesian metaphysics created a problem for the Dutch Cartesians. Its relevance to theology was as hard to deny as its inclusion within philosophy. While it is concerned with the nature of God and our relation to God, it is developed using the method of doubt that is the distinguishing mark of Cartesian philosophy. Even worse, from the Dutch Cartesian point of view, Cartesian metaphysics seems to play an indispensable role in justifying Descartes' physics, which formed the part of his philosophy the Dutch Cartesians hoped most of all to separate from theology.

In his first published work, a presentation of Cartesian philosophy, Spinoza consciously sought to undermine the Dutch Cartesian separation thesis by focusing on this weak spot. Especially in its appendix, the work employed Descartes' metaphysical ideas in support of claims that were of obvious relevance to theology. In effect, this appendix was a treatise on Cartesian natural theology. Both its title and its format were deliberately reminiscent of standard metaphysics textbooks used in the Dutch universities that had included a great deal of natural theology.

What was even worse was that Spinoza explicitly used his natural theological conclusions to support claims of practical relevance. Voetius had warned that Cartesian philosophy could weaken subjects' piety by undermining their belief in the true and binding nature of divine

commandments. Spinoza vindicated this warning by arguing that the Cartesian conception of God is incompatible with the belief that God rules over us as a prince and legislator. In fact, God is not the kind of being who can issue moral commands or care whether or not they are followed. This implicit view came out particularly clearly in Spinoza's exchange with the amateur theologian Willem van Blyenbergh.

I then discuss how the unofficial leader of the Dutch Cartesians—Johannes De Raey—responded to Spinoza's challenge. This time he did not draw upon Cartesian philosophy; rather, he adverted to the typically Protestant principle that Scripture is the sole and ultimate authority on theological questions.

4 *The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

This chapter measures the extent to which Spinoza's next published work, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) can be understood as a response to De Raey on this point. The *TTP* expressed agreement with the Dutch Cartesian claims that theology and philosophy are mutually independent and that theology consists entirely in the study and teaching of Scripture. But, unlike the Dutch Cartesians, Spinoza claimed that Scripture's purpose is practical rather than theoretical. It is meant to encourage pious action rather than to teach detailed speculative truths. The *TTP* challenged the arguments that De Raey and the Dutch Cartesian theologian Christoph Wittich had made for the view that Scripture teaches theological mysteries and other speculative doctrines. On the contrary, Spinoza argued, Scripture does not even claim to teach such things. All that it proposes to teach is 'true religion', which Spinoza identified in functional terms as whatever beliefs are sufficient to motivate just and charitable behaviour. Naturally, a wide variety of beliefs, compatible with an equally wide variety of metaphysical theories, can meet this functional definition. Thus very few philosophical ideas can be said to decidedly contradict the theological teaching of Scripture. Spinoza could in this way superficially accept De Raey's argument that Scripture must be the ultimate authority on theological topics while maintaining that philosophy can derive extremely heterodox claims concerning the nature of God and his relation to us—claims that would belong squarely within the domain of theology as almost everybody besides Spinoza conceived of it.

5 The *Ethics* and the *Anti-Spinoza*

This chapter examines Spinoza's philosophical masterpiece, the *Ethics*, and Wittich's objections to it in his *Anti-Spinoza*. The *Ethics* finalized Spinoza's rejection of the Dutch Cartesian separation thesis in two ways. First, it argued that God and nature are in fact identical, making it utterly impossible to separate natural philosophy from theology. Moreover, it showed that the philosophical examination of God carries radical and extreme practical consequences, supporting, for instance, the beliefs that there is no divine providence, that God does not issue moral commands of any kind, and that all human actions are carried out by divine right. Secondly, it argued against the distinction between will and intellect, which the Dutch Cartesians required to maintain their separation thesis.

I examine Spinoza's arguments in the *Ethics*, arguing that Spinoza's method of reaching his natural theological conclusions was the same method by which Descartes had drawn conclusions about God, namely the consultation of a supposed innate idea and the consideration of what follows from that idea. Spinoza's argument for the distinction between will and intellect is relatively (though not entirely) independent of this reasoning. Nevertheless, it is compelling in its own right.

I then turn to Wittich's *Anti-Spinoza*. A posthumously published volume, probably compiled out of teaching notes, the *Anti-Spinoza* attempted a decisive refutation of most of the doctrines in the *Ethics*. It also aimed to reveal a crucial difference between the philosophical method followed by Descartes in the *Meditations* and that followed by Spinoza. Wittich drew not only upon Cartesian philosophy, but also upon a number of important concepts from medieval and Renaissance philosophy. I argue that his attempt to understand Spinoza's philosophy in terms of these concepts failed and that his argument for the existence of a crucial methodological difference between Spinoza and Descartes was unsound. Moreover, he failed to refute Spinoza's arguments against the will/intellect distinction.

Epilogue: Empiricism

This chapter argues that the fundamental difference between Spinozism and Cartesianism lay not in methodology but in the content of the innate ideas with which each proposed to begin. Spinoza's innate idea of God presented its object in a very different way to that of Descartes. Inevitably,

different conclusions followed from the two ideas; theologically radical conclusions from Spinoza's innate idea and theologically innocent conclusions—or so at least the Dutch Cartesians hoped—from Descartes' innate idea. What the Dutch Cartesians needed to do, in order to rule out Spinozism decisively, was to find a way of showing that their innate ideas were acceptable foundations for reasoning whereas Spinoza's were not. Yet I argue that there is no obvious principle on whose basis they could make this demonstration. Indeed, disputes over the epistemic status of putative innate ideas are, in general, inherently resistant to principled decision.

I end by briefly discussing a rival form of natural philosophy that was embraced in the Dutch universities at the start of the eighteenth century. This rival form—based on the empiricism of Newton rather than on the nativism of Descartes—eventually ousted Cartesianism for good. It required no innate ideas and was therefore free to claim that such ideas should have no role in true philosophy. In this way it permitted the rejection of Spinozism in a way that the Dutch Cartesians could not. This, I suggest, may have been part of what helped it gain popularity at the expense of its Cartesian rival.

However, I go on to argue that empiricism does not ground as decisive a refutation of Spinozism as some of its supporters believed. Unlike the Dutch Cartesian philosophy, the new empirical philosophy did not and could not claim to carry no theological implications. Its promoters claimed that its theological implications were perfectly in line with orthodoxy and very much contradicted Spinozism. Yet they could not deny that the conclusions Spinoza drew from his innate idea of God could be reconstrued as part of a theory supported by empirically verifiable claims. Nor could they eliminate the possibility that new empirical evidence—and new evidence was, by their own admission, coming in at a rapid and steady rate—might someday vindicate such claims and thus turn the balance in favour of Spinozism.

Thus, I conclude, these new natural philosophers were no more successful than the Dutch Cartesians in achieving a final refutation of Spinoza's conclusions. Nevertheless, their empirical methodology, clearly different from that employed by Descartes and Spinoza, made them look more successful as anti-Spinozists than their Cartesian rivals.

1

The Utrecht Crisis

Natural Theology and Cartesianism

1.1 Introduction

In one prominent tradition of pre-modern natural philosophy, the examination of nature both afforded understanding of the causes of natural phenomena and provided meaning and guidance to human life. The natural world was held to have been made for humans by a benevolent creator, to ensure that upon examining his work they would be inspired to honour him and to have faith in his ways. Natural creatures existed for the sake of their potential benefit to the human spirit and could serve it in two ways. They could provide for human needs directly, thereby encouraging people to thank and revere God. Or, being themselves admirably provided for by their natural environment, they could demonstrate the generosity and benevolence of their creator, and thus encourage humans to trust him.¹ The Gospel of Matthew exemplifies the latter device:

Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day

¹ According to Aquinas, before the Fall, when humans had no bodily needs to be served by animals, the latter served educational purposes alone: 'Humans in the state of innocence did not need animals for their bodily needs.... They needed them, however, in order to have experimental knowledge of their natures. [*homines in statu innocentiae non indigebant animalibus ad necessitatem corporalem*. . . . *Indigebant tamen eis ad experimentalem cognitionem sumendam de naturis eorum.*]' Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Romae: Forzani, 1894) 1.996.a1.

is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?²

On this pre-modern view, there was no division between the task of understanding the causes of natural phenomena on one hand and that of drawing moral and spiritual inspiration from nature on the other. It was supposed that nature's creation, down to the details, served the final purpose of revealing God to humankind. To ask for an explanation of some natural phenomenon was not only to ask what the natural cause of that phenomenon was, but also to ask what role it played in God's final purpose. Nature had been made by a creator with a demand for human reverence. Thus, physics was a form of worship. As well as uncovering the direct natural causes of things, it also evoked the reverence that nature was designed to evoke.

This was not the only manner in which nature was conceived during this period. It has been suggested that, contrary to the view just described, 'during the Christian centuries "Nature" had ... been consigned to the Satanic order'.³ It is true that, in pre-modern times, post-lapsarian nature was often regarded as emblematic of devilish mischief rather than divine good, so that pre-modern thought is characterized by both attitudes. But within many traditions, such as that of Protestant neo-Scholasticism, the vision of nature as an exemplification of God's goodness and an instrument of reverence was dominant.⁴ For example, this is the overwhelming sense given in Lambertus Danaeus'⁵ *Physica Christianae*:

² Matthew 6:26–30 (King James version).

³ Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth-Century Background: Studies in the Thought of the Age in Relation to Poetry and Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 35. Willey cites an example from Milton's 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', where Nature 'woos the gentle Air | to hide her guilty front with innocent snow'.

⁴ See Klaas van Berkel and Arie Johan Vanderjagt, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change*, v. 17 (Leuven; Dudley: Peeters, 2006).

⁵ Lambertus Danaeus (1530–1596): professor of theology at Leiden; attempted to derive physics from the Pentateuch; claimed to trust Scripture and the Church Fathers first, Aristotle second; given this, his conclusions were still overwhelmingly Aristotelian; loved the idea of the divine 'Book of Nature' to an unusual degree, even for a Protestant natural theologian. See Olivier Fatio, *Méthode et théologie: Lambert Daneau et les débuts de la scolastique Réformée* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1976); Eric Jorink, 'Reading the Book of Nature in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic', in *The Book of Nature in Early Modern and Modern History*, ed. Klaas van Berkel and Arie Johan Vanderjagt (Leuven: Peeters, 2006).

this is a great goodnesse of God, that he would have thinges to exist and bee, which were not before. Moreover, in that hee gave them lyfe and nature, to the intent they shoulde exist, whiche could not bee had from any other than him. Whoe onely is the fountayn of lyfe and afterward hath assigned unto every kinde of thing its owne proper & most convenient foode, and not assigned it once, but also preparereth, distributeth, and yieldeth it every day. Finally, in that he dayly preserveth and defendeth all thinges that are: and beyng a good and mercifull father, of his owne greate bowntie hath not onely given them partes & members, wherby they may cōmodiously live, but endowed them also with motion and sense. Whereby they may passe their life pleasantly, and willingly enjoye it with a sweete delight. All which it were infinite to reckon. And therefore it is well and truely sayd in the 33. *Psal.* and 5. verse, *that the whole earth is full of his goodnesse.* And againe, in the 145. *Psal.* and 7. verse, it is sayde, *that the multitude of the goodnesse of God, springeth foorth from his workes: For hee openeth his hande, and satisfied every living thing unto fullnesse and pleasure.* Wherunto that seemeth to appertayne which is written in the 147. and 148. *Psal.* and that may well bee concluded, which all the auncient & godly fathers have judged & specially *Tertullian* hath oftentimes written, to wit, *That God by the creating of thys world, is cognized, and by the preaching of his woord is recognized.*⁶

When Descartes and his followers began to promote their new methods of natural philosophy in the Dutch Republic, they ran into conflict with this view.⁷ Cartesian natural philosophy arose with the conviction that humans have no knowledge of God's ultimate purposes. At least, the Cartesians held, one does not arrive at such knowledge through the study of physics.

⁶ Lambert Daneau, [*Physica Christiana*] *The Wonderfull Workmanship of the World: wherein is contained an excellent discourse of Christian naturall Philosophie, concerning the fourme, knowledge, and vse of all thinges created: specially gathered out of the Fountaines of holy Scripture*, trans. Thomas Twyne (London: Andrew Maunsell, 1578) 67.

⁷ But what exactly were Descartes' new methods? A precise definition of Cartesian method was seldom given by those who claimed to use it and giving one does not seem to be required for my purposes in this book. Daniel Garber presents an interesting theory about how Descartes developed and modified his method during his early career: Daniel Garber, 'Descartes and Method in 1637', *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* (1988). Discussions of Descartes' method in general abound; to attempt to select a representative list would be invidious and serve only to demonstrate that I am not a Descartes scholar (which I do not claim to be). Though it should therefore mean very little, I can recommend the following books: Dennis Des Chene, *Spirits and Clocks: Machine and Organism in Descartes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Daniel Garber, *Descartes' Metaphysical Physics, Science and its Conceptual Foundations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes' System of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gary Hatfield, *Descartes and the Meditations* (London: Routledge, 2002); Helen Hattab, *Descartes on Forms and Mechanisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Peter K. Machamer and J. E. McGuire, *Descartes's Changing Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).