

Tammy Nyden-Bullock

Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind



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SPINOZA'S RADICAL CARTESIAN MIND

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Continuum International Publishing Group
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX
80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704, New York, NY 10038
www.continuumbooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-10: HB: 0-8264-8587-1

ISBN-13: HB: 978-0-8264-8587-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Aarontype Limited, Easton, Bristol

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

For Andy, Cole and Jonah

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Acknowledgements

The completion of this book depended on the generosity and kind assistance of many people. I would particularly like to thank two individuals without whom this project would not have been possible and for whom I have great admiration. Patricia Easton, my dissertation adviser at Claremont Graduate University, who supported this project from its very inception and taught me the dual importance of historical context and textual analysis. She made my graduate years a pure joy and continues to be a great mentor in academia and in life. I also want to give special thanks to Wiep van Bunge, who patiently introduced me to scholarship on the Dutch historical context and generously invited me to work alongside the research programme at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, ‘The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic: Cartesianism, Spinozism and Empiricism, 1650–1750’ during the 2001–2002 academic year. In addition to his philosophical mentorship, he kindly helped arrange practical details for my stay, down to the requisite Dutch bike. I will forever be grateful.

I would like to thank the Netherland–America Foundation for financially supporting my stay in Holland and the Erasmus University of Rotterdam for providing office space, library privileges and other forms of institutional support. I especially want to thank the research group itself: Wiep van Bunge, Henri Krop, Han van Ruler, Paul Schuurman, Bart Leewenburgh, Michiel Wielema and Gunter Coppens for their kind hospitality, pleasant conversation and collective sense of humour – it was a delight to work with all of you. Thank you to Theo Verbeek for meeting with me in Utrecht, sharing his work on the TTP, and for a very helpful discussion on Spinoza’s early works.

I am indebted to my dissertation committee for their comments and guidance: Patricia Easton, Wiep van Bunge, Alan Nelson and Nick Jolley; to Claremont Graduate University for a dissertation fellowship; as well as to the Kristeller-Popkin Foundation and Grinnell College for providing additional funds allowing me to continue my research and to rework and build upon the dissertation to form this monograph. I am also grateful to the National Endowment of the Humanities, Steven Nadler and Donald

Rutherford for holding the 2004 Summer Institute on 'The Intersection of Philosophy, Science and Theology in the Seventeenth Century'. The discussions from that summer have had a large impact on the further development of this project. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Nick Zurko, Ted Recio, Ilan Moscovitz, and Patrick Laine for Proofreading and Julie Owens and Andy Bullock for their invaluable assistance with the index.

Some of the material in this book has been previously published in 'Radical Cartesian Politics: van Velthuysen, De la Court, and Spinoza', *Studia Spinozana* 15 (2006), pp. 35–65. I would like to thank the publisher, Königshausen & Neumann, for their permission to re-publish that material here.

I thank the following for permission to use translations:

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Abbreviations

CM	<i>The Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts (Cogitata Metaphysica)</i>
E	<i>Ethics (Ethica)</i>
Ep	<i>The Letters (Epistola)</i>
KV	<i>Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being (Korte Verhandeling)</i>
Med	<i>Meditations on First Philosophy (Meditationes de Prime Philosophia)</i>
PP	<i>Principles of Philosophy (Principia Philosophiae)</i>
PPC	<i>Descartes' Principles of Philosophy (Principia Philosophiae Cartesiarea)</i>
TIE	<i>Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect (Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione)</i>
TP	<i>Political Treatise (Tractatus Politicus)</i>
TTP	<i>Theological-Political Treatise (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)</i>

References to the *Ethics* use the following system:

Roman numeral = part

A = Axiom

ap = Appendix

C = Corollary

D = Definition

d = Demonstration

ex = Explanation

L = Lemma

P = Proposition

Prol = Prolegomenon

po = Postulate

pr = Preface

S = Scholium

References to the PPC, CM, TIE and KV cite page numbers from the Curley translation (1985). Quotes from the *Ethics* are also from this translation.

References to *The Letters* cite page numbers from the Shirley translation (Spinoza 1995).

References to the TP and TTP cite page numbers from the Shirley translation (Spinoza 1998 and Spinoza 2002).

References to Descartes' works cite page numbers of the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch translations (Descartes 1984–1995).

References to the PP, Med, PPC, CM and KV denote the part with roman numerals and the chapter with arabic numerals.

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Chapter 1

Political Divisions: Orangists vs the States-Party

Introduction

Spinoza lived and wrote at a time of profound philosophical controversy in the United Provinces. Holland was witnessing a shift from scholastic Aristotelianism to the new ideas of Galileo, Hobbes and Descartes. Debates in philosophy, theology, politics and religion took place both inside and outside of the academy. These debates, which centred on Cartesianism, form an important context for understanding Spinoza's philosophy and its development. This book traces the development of Spinoza's epistemology in light of this historical and philosophical context. The first section describes the political, theological and philosophical divide of Spinoza's time: that between the Orthodox Calvinist, scholastic supporters of the House of Orange and the freethinking Remonstrant, Cartesian supporters of the States-Party. It contains an examination of some of the popular pamphlets at the centre of the debate and explains Spinoza's political writings as the first systematization of doctrines found within those pamphlets. The second section of this work reconstructs the development of key epistemological and metaphysical doctrines in Spinoza's writings concerning truth, error and falsity, and in the end explains how these developments relate to Spinoza's project of systematizing Radical Cartesian political theory.

History of Cartesianism in the Netherlands

Cartesianism had its very beginnings in the Netherlands. Descartes' ideas were first taught by his friend Henricus Reneri (1593–1639), chair of philosophy at the newly established Athenaeum of Utrecht (soon to become the University of Utrecht). Descartes was working on his own natural philosophy at this time and Reneri introduced Descartes' ideas, as well as the natural philosophy of other contemporary thinkers, in his lectures.¹

Reneri died suddenly in 1639, but by this time Descartes' ideas were already drawing attention – and controversy – in both the universities

and among the leaders of the Reformed Church. Descartes' *Discourse and Essays* had already been published anonymously in Leiden in 1637. They were a source of concern for orthodox Calvinists but a source of inspiration to those committed to the New Philosophy.

The first generation of Dutch Cartesians held their alliance to the New Philosophy, not to Descartes in particular. They respected Descartes' work but saw it as equal in importance to, rather than superseding, other modern works, such as those of Bacon and Gassendi. The earliest Cartesians were an eclectic group that focused on empirical methods, rather than the *a priori* approach we now associate with Descartes. These empirical leanings reflect the Dutch intellectual culture of the early seventeenth century. A trading nation at war, the emerging Dutch Republic needed the best that technology could offer to fight off major world powers, not to mention Mother Nature and her constant threat of flood. Mathematics was seen as the basis of science and valued for its practical applications in navigation and engineering. This emphasis on the importance of mathematics made Descartes' philosophy attractive to Dutch intellectuals. The practical orientation of Dutch scientists and mathematicians reflects not only a nation at war, but also a typically Renaissance and humanist conception of cooperation between scientists and artisans, a conception that blurred the distinction between practice and theory.²

Aristotelian physics was losing its power of explanation with new observations in astronomy and the questioning of basic Aristotelian concepts. Dutch scientists were ready for an alternative and Descartes' philosophy provided them with a new and useful framework in which to do science. In this way, early commitments to Cartesianism were pragmatic rather than dogmatic or ideological. Early Cartesians were comfortable combining Descartes' ideas with whatever worked, even with philosophies that we now see as contradicting that of Descartes. For example, it was not unusual for Descartes' philosophy to be combined with that of Gassendi.³ The early Cartesians often blended Descartes' ideas with other modern philosophies, as well as those of scholastic thinkers.

The status of Cartesianism had changed by the second half of the seventeenth century. There was an economic boom and an upper class emerged that happened to contain several Cartesians among its intellectual elite. Within these circles, the insistence on a useful science had grown out of fashion.⁴ Now separating theory and practice, they embraced Descartes' *a priori* method. That is not to say that they did not see Cartesianism as having practical implications. On the contrary, Descartes' philosophy became central in discussions of politics and religion. What changed was the status of philosophy itself; it was no longer seen as subservient to the higher disciplines.

In the early seventeenth century, philosophy was a preparatory subject, part of a general secondary education, whose purpose was to ready young minds for the study of theology, medicine or law. It was not a subject unto itself. Cartesianism changed that. It provided a new framework in which those higher disciplines could be carried out. Students (many of whom were in the higher faculties) flocked to tutors and professors willing to teach these new ideas. In this way, Descartes' name was no longer just one among the list of modern philosophers. 'Cartesianism' came to signify the New Philosophy itself.

The Cultural Context of Dutch Cartesianism: Political, Religious and Academic

In the early seventeenth century, rulers and ruling elites were not immediately concerned with the merely preparatory subject of philosophy. It was taught in an institutional context in which it was under church supervision and subject to the claims of confessional theology.⁵ This began to change in the 1640s when the Cartesian controversies emerged within Dutch universities. A debate over the relationship between philosophy and theology ensued. The Cartesians pushed for a separation of philosophy and theology whereas the Orthodox Calvinists insisted that philosophy was the servant of theology and was never to contradict or question theological dogma. This movement to separate philosophy from theology did not originate in Descartes' writings alone. It also resulted from the Cartesians' resistance to the further reformation led by Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676).⁶ This change in the status of philosophy caused such turmoil in society – both in and out of the academy – that rulers had to become involved. Confessionally regulated theology, once the stabilizing force responsible for cultural cohesion, increasingly disintegrated in the light of the New Philosophy. By 1650 governments were compelled to try to cope with the various political and theological issues raised by the New Philosophy, philosophy now being 'an integral and essential part of their statecraft'.⁷

Cartesianism became central to three national discussions: republican politics, reformed theology and the problem of how to make Cartesianism fit for use within the Dutch academy. These three issues form the heart of what has come to be called 'Dutch Cartesianism'. When studying Spinoza and his response to Cartesianism, we must keep in mind this Dutch context, for this is what Spinoza was exposed to and to which his philosophy responded.

Political and Religious Context

There was no official Dutch 'constitution' until 1795. Before then, the Union of Utrecht served this role.⁸ This treaty, unifying the northern provinces previously controlled by Spain, contained two contradictory impulses.⁹ On the one hand, it recognized the States General as a limited central body of government. This assembly consisted of representatives from the seven Northern Provinces and each province had one vote. On the other hand, it proclaimed that the sovereign rights of each individual province stay intact. Such rights were understood in terms of traditional privileges of cities and provinces dating back to Habsburg rule.

This tension between states rights and centralized power was quite complicated. The stadholder, another institution from Habsburg rule, was the highest-ranking official and dignitary in each province. It was normal for one man to be a stadholder of several provinces at once. Usually, a member of the House of Orange held the majority of provinces with the remaining one or two going to their Nassau cousins, resulting in a strong centralizing power. This centralizing power was like a monarchy in several respects. In Habsburg tradition, the stadholders were nobles living in a splendid and hierarchical courtly culture. Frederick Hendrik (1584–1647), Prince of Orange, capitalized on these traditions to increase the prestige, authority and dynastic intentions of the House of Orange.¹⁰ He also attempted to enhance his prestige by marrying his son and heir, William II (1626–1650), to a daughter of Charles I of England, Princess Mary. This was the first time that the House of Orange-Nassau had formed a marriage alliance with a major royal line. Further, the stadholder fulfilled many functions of a monarch. He imposed taxes, oversaw the military, enacted laws for The Netherlands as a whole and maintained the Dutch Reformed Church. The stadholders exercised their centralizing power through their delegates in the States General. Since they held the majority of provinces, they had the majority of votes in the assembly. Decisions often came in conflict with the interests and traditional privileges of individual provinces, particularly Holland.

These tensions between Holland and the House of Orange were merged with other divisions in Dutch society: religious divisions between Remonstrants and Orthodox Calvinists and philosophical divisions between Cartesians and Aristotelians. Frederick Hendrik was the stadholder of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel during the rise of Cartesianism. He was heir to his brother-in-law Maurits of Nassau (1567–1625) who had taken a very tough stance against unorthodox strands such as Arminianism¹¹ and Remonstrantism.¹² Whereas the Arminians claimed that

the spiritual role of the Church was and should be separate from the secular role of government, the Orthodox saw divine law as the only law. They identified any tendency to give the government more say in the affairs of the Church with the Arminian heresy. By siding with the strict Orthodox Calvinists, Maurits secured an important relationship between the House of Orange and the Church.¹³ Frederick Hendrik, on the other hand, had little sympathy for Counter-Remonstrant theology. He lived at a time when political Arminianism had gained quite a bit of power. Even if he had wanted to adopt his brother-in-law's tough stance he would have been unable to do so and preserve the stability of the state. Instead, he had to find a middle path that would accommodate both the 'Arminian' and 'Counter-Remonstrant' party-factions.¹⁴ His approach was to make both sides dependent on him so that they would want and need to co-operate with him. He would dispense favours to both sides, which dissatisfied both parties but left them unwilling to criticize his affairs or challenge his authority.¹⁵ And so his rule (1625–1647) was one of relative religious and philosophical tolerance. That is not to say that there was an end to tensions. Most towns became firmly tied to one of the party-factions. For instance, while Amsterdam and Rotterdam were Arminian, Leiden and Utrecht were solidly Counter-Remonstrant.¹⁶

Frederick Hendrik was a politician first and foremost. Throughout his rule his leanings would shift from one party to the other as it benefited his own political career. His most significant shift would occur in 1633. Before this time he tended to side with the Arminians and support Holland. However, the Holland Arminians began to gain too much power. Before the early 1630s they could not challenge Frederick Hendrik because they needed his support to survive. But by 1633 public support had shifted towards the Arminians. They were no longer dependent on the stadholder and were pushing for primacy in the Republic.¹⁷ Frederick Hendrik therefore decided to shift his policies to align with the Counter-Remonstrants.

It is important to note that this division in Dutch society was not solely based on religion. Military and economic factors played large parts as well. For example, one of the most divisive issues during 1634 was the relationship between France and the United Provinces. An alternative to peace with Spain was an alliance with France, and Louis XIII had made a tempting offer of a close partnership and subsidies. If the alliance were made, The Netherlands would be locked into confrontation with Spain and subordination to France for years to come. An alliance would also increase the power of the stadholder, therefore minimizing the influence of Holland indefinitely. What particularly upset the Arminian towns was a clause in the treaty that the United Provinces must not negotiate with Spain.¹⁸ This strongly conflicted with the commercial interests of Holland.