

## Book review

*Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism: Philosophy and Theology*, by Alexander X. Douglas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 184.

Descartes attitude toward Christianity and revealed religion is a pretty enigmatic issue. On the one hand, we find Descartes making the hyperbolic claim that God creates the eternal truths of mathematics and logic from absolute freedom of indifference:

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever [*nihil omnino esse posse*] which does not depend on him. *This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good* [*nullamve rationem veri & boni*]. If this were not so, then ... God would not have been *completely indifferent* with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. (AT VII 435-6| CSM II 293-4, emphasis added)

Along the same lines, Descartes counsels Mersenne 'not to hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who lays these laws in nature *just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom*' (AT X 145| CSM III 23, emphasis added). For many of Descartes medieval predecessors, such claims – which make the truths of mathematics and logic depend on God's arbitrary will – would be nothing more than a form of popular, unintelligible fanaticism with which there is hardly any point engaging in philosophical discourse.

Yet, on the other hand, we have the much less recognized face of Descartes as one who passed over in almost complete silence any issue related to Christ. Of all the major philosophers of the seventeenth century, Descartes wrote by far the least about the founding narrative of Christianity. The recent outstanding and comprehensive *Cambridge Descartes Lexicon* has no entry on Christ, nor is he mentioned at all in the lengthy index of this 770-page volume. With the exception of a few studies (such as Denis Kamboucher's exciting 'Reason and Faith in the *Objections and Replies*'), the issue of Descartes silence about Christ seems to have fallen under the radar of current scholarship.

How should we explain the coherence of these two facets of Descartes thought? One possible answer to the latter question is that the common ground underlying Descartes avoidance of almost any discussion of Christ and his extravagant claim about the creation of the eternal truths was the desire to fortify his philosophy against any suspicion of unorthodoxy.

Evading any discussion of Christology was clearly a wise political move, since almost any position he could have taken on this issue was likely to get him involved in troubles that were not necessary and in fact an impediment to the propagation of his new philosophy.

The strategic separation of philosophy and theology by Descartes Dutch followers stands at the very centre of Alexander Douglas impressive new book, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism*. This is a clear, modest, and erudite study which comprises six short chapters. In the following I will provide a cursory summary of each of the chapters, and then turn to a critical evaluation of some of the book's chief claims. Douglas himself suggests that the main aim of the book is 'to understand Spinoza's philosophy by situating it in its immediate historical context', that is, Dutch Cartesianism (p. 1). Overall, I think Douglas presents a convincing argument for the importance of this context for understanding Spinoza.

The first chapter of the book addresses the Utrecht Affair, the early-1640s clash between Henricus Regius (1598-1679), Descartes erstwhile friend and follower (the relationship between the two later soured), who served as a professor of medicine at the newly founded (1636) University of Utrecht, and Gilbertus Voetius (1589-1676), the powerful, orthodox Calvinist, rector and professor of theology at Utrecht. Regius' denouncement of scholastic physics, and specifically of the doctrine of substantial forms, alarmed the proponents of what was known as 'Mosaic Physics', the core belief of which was that 'the essential purpose of each of God's creatures was to demonstrate His benevolence in providing for the needs of every living thing' (p. 12). Douglas presents the Cartesian view as diametrically opposed to the 'Mosaic Physics' of Voetius and his followers, insofar as 'the Cartesians did not find it necessary to ascribe any religious meaning to nature at all' (p. 13). Undoubtedly, the Cartesians downplayed the importance of teleology as exhibiting divine benevolence, though I tend to think that it would be somewhat imprecise to say that for Descartes (or the Cartesians) nature was devoid of *any* religious meaning. While Descartes rejects the use of teleological explanation in physics, he openly employs divine teleology and benevolence in explaining the mind-body union in the Sixth Meditation (AT VII 83-5). This being noted, I find convincing Douglas claim that for the Voetians, Cartesianism was to blame 'for depriving people of crucial religious lessons' (p. 35).

The second chapter addresses the Dutch Cartesian response to the charges of the Voetians. This chapter, like the previous one, relies substantially on the outstanding studies of Theo Verbeek (especially, [Verbeek \(1992\)](#)), and Douglas is conscientious and generous in acknowledging his debt. The chapter begins by pointing out the reason motivating the anxiety of the Voetians regarding the propagation of Cartesianism in the philosophical curriculum. In late medieval and early modern universities, philosophy was commonly taught as an introduction to the general ways of inquiry before students moved on to the higher faculties of law, medicine, and theology. Thus, the

debate between the Cartesians and the old school had significant repercussions for the much wider issue of the education of European elites and civil bureaucracy (p. 36). Attempting to relax the anxieties of traditionalists, the Cartesians argued in favour of a complete separation of philosophy, on the one hand, and theology, medicine, and law, on the other. For the Cartesians, philosophy no longer aimed at preparing students for the study of the higher faculties, since the strict philosophical standards of clarity and distinctness could not, and should not, be applied to the higher faculties. Scripture, according to the Cartesians, was not aimed at teaching philosophical truths, but merely what is necessary for spiritual health and salvation, and for that purpose, 'a rough and ready explanation of nature, as can be gained from sense experience, is more than sufficient' (p. 40). From the point of view of the Cartesians, Douglas claims, the very discipline of natural theology was a chimeric conflation of philosophy and theology, which should have been kept apart (p. 43).

This clear-cut separation between philosophy and theology, which could release the Dutch Cartesians from the suspicious eye of the theologians, was not however easy to square with quite a few of Descartes own claims. Douglas rightly points out the contradiction between the Dutch Cartesians' separation thesis and Descartes famous image of the Tree of Philosophy in the preface to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*: 'The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely, medicine, mechanics, and morals' (AT IXB 14). Douglas suggests that the Dutch Cartesians either ignored this passage or read it in some manner compatible with their views (p. 52). However, the discord between the separation thesis and Descartes own claims seems far more extensive. According to Douglas, the Dutch Cartesians 'may have believed that the contemplation of God's intrinsic nature is another misconstrued and illegitimate intellectual activity like natural theology' (p. 48). Yet, much of Descartes Third and Fourth Meditations engage in precisely this kind of activity.

In spite of its significant internal tensions, the Dutch Cartesian position gained a political victory in September 1656 when the States of Holland published an edict requiring philosophers and theologians to stop intervening in each other's business.

Metaphysics was clearly the main field where philosophy and theology came into close contact. The Cartesian failure to separate physics from metaphysics is the focus of the book's third chapter. Douglas opens the chapter with the following remarkable passage from Descartes *Conversation with Burman*:

A point to note is that you should not devote so much effort to the meditations and to metaphysical questions, or give them elaborate treatments in commentaries and the like. *Still less should one do what some try to do, and dig more deeply into these*

*questions than the author [Descartes] did: he has dealt with them quite deeply enough.*  
(AT V 165, emphasis added)

Apart from the striking combination of insecurity and authoritarianism in Descartes tone, the passage above makes clear that for the great father of modern philosophy, metaphysics was an unwanted child. It is in this context that Douglas begins his discussion of the philosophy of Spinoza, the great metaphysician of modern times. Douglas's chief claim in this chapter is that Spinoza's first published work, his geometrical presentation of Descartes *Principles of Philosophy*, and its appendix on *Metaphysical Thoughts* (1663), was an attempt to undermine the Cartesian separation of philosophy and theology, and that Spinoza attempted to show that the Cartesian conception of God is incompatible with the view of God as a prince or judge. I will return to this last claim in my critical discussion.

According to Spinoza's own admission, the separation of philosophy and faith was the primary aim of his 1670 *Theological Political Treatise* (TTP Ch. 14| III/174/4), which is the subject of Douglas fourth chapter. Despite the apparent similarities between the Dutch Cartesian separation thesis and the TTP's doctrine of the separation of philosophy and faith, there were significant differences between the two claims. While the TTP argued that scripture is supposed to teach nothing but simple morality, Dutch Cartesians, such as Christopher Wittich, believed that Scripture contains deep speculative mysteries (p. 96). In the TTP Spinoza mocked those who believe that deep mysteries are hidden in Scripture, claiming that such alleged mysteries are 'nothing but the inventions of Aristotle or Plato' (TTP Ch. 13| III/168/3). Throughout this chapter, Douglas attempts to reconstruct a critical dialogue between Spinoza's critique of traditional religion and the Dutch Cartesian defence of religious orthodoxy.

In the fifth chapter and the brief epilogue which follows it, Douglas attempts to situate Spinoza's major work, the *Ethics*, in the context of contemporary Dutch Cartesianism, discuss the attack on the *Ethics* in Wittich's posthumously published *Anti-Spinoza* (1690), and suggest a broader historical narrative which explains the emergence of Dutch Newtonianism in the early eighteenth century as the result of a stalemate in the debate between the Dutch Cartesians and Spinoza.

Having provided this brief overview of the book, let me turn now to a few critical points. Douglas presents the following reconstruction of one of Spinoza's arguments for the existence of God in E1p11:

- (A1) God is a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes (definition/premise);
- (A2) It pertains to the nature of substance to exist (premise);

Therefore:

- (A3) God must exist.

The reconstruction is more or less correct. Yet, following this reconstruction, Douglas notes: 'Since the conclusion of the argument seems to be

implicitly contained in one of its premises, as a proof it is circular' (p. 116). Here, I beg to differ. (A<sub>3</sub>) is *not* contained in either one of the premises, but *only in their conjunction*. If the containment of the conclusion in the conjunction of the premises makes an argument circular, then any valid argument is circular. However, that's not how we normally understand the charge of circularity. Douglas might have been misled by the common, yet erroneous, claim that Spinoza's argument in E1p11 is a variant of the ontological argument. However, unlike the ontological proof, Spinoza does not *define* God as a being whose essence involves existence (or as a being to whose nature existence pertains). Instead, Spinoza provides an intricate proof for the claim that existence pertains to the nature of substance, a proof that relies heavily on the non-trivial claim that *everything must have a cause*. This last claim plays no role in Anselm's ontological proof.

Another central claim of the last two chapters of Douglas book is that 'Spinoza followed Descartes in drawing knowledge directly from his innate idea of God' (p. 114), and that the competition between the Cartesian and Spinozist claims to have clear and distinct ideas of God led to a stalemate (p. 146), since neither side had effective measures to undermine the claims of the other side. I am not convinced by these claims. Let me briefly explain why. First, I am not aware of any place where Spinoza attempts to justify the veracity of his idea of God by claiming that it is innate. On the contrary, for Spinoza, unlike Descartes, an innate cognition may well be false. For Descartes, God's benevolence is supposed to guarantee that God does not deceive us by implanting in us false innate ideas. Spinoza's God has none of the anthropomorphic traits of the Cartesian God and he may well be a deceiver. (See TTP Ch. 2| III/31.) Indeed, in Letter 54, Spinoza describes the belief in free will as 'innate', though patently false (III/266/26). For Spinoza, the innateness of cognitions has little to do with their veracity. Second, even if it were the case that both Spinoza and Descartes relied on innate ideas of God, Douglas's pronouncement of a stalemate between the two camps is much too quick, as each camp had quite a few weapons that could be used to undermine, if not completely refute, the other position. The arguments of the *Ethics* are displayed in a pretty transparent manner, as if trying to provoke critics and invite them to check and challenge the strength of each and every argument. Though the *Ethics* is more tightly argued than any other work in the history of philosophy (as well as most philosophical works in our day), it does contain argumentative gaps. Those are mostly minor, but some are more substantial, and exposing major gaps in the arguments of the *Ethics* is clearly a powerful way to undermine Spinoza's philosophy as a whole.

Let me now turn to my final point of disagreement with Douglas. In the third chapter, Douglas exposes and analyses in an artful manner the Cartesian hostility toward metaphysics. Yet it is precisely against this background that I find Douglas's view of Spinoza as bringing Cartesian philosophy to its ultimate conclusion quite perplexing. According to Douglas, 'Spinoza built up

what could be called a Cartesian natural theology' (p. 64). Douglas also describes Spinoza as 'arguing that the Cartesian conception of God is incompatible with the belief that God rules over us as a prince' (p. 6). The last claim seems to suggest that Spinoza *begins with* the Cartesian conception of God, and then shows that it is incompatible with other crucial claims Descartes makes about God. However, I somewhat doubt that Spinoza was ever willing to accept the Cartesian conception of God as a reasonable point of departure. Consider the following passage from the earliest letter we currently have from Spinoza. In 1661, the barely twenty-nine-year old Spinoza was asked by Henry Oldenburg, then secretary of the Royal Society in London, what were his main disagreements with Descartes and Bacon. Spinoza did not mince words:

You ask next what errors I find in the Philosophy of Descartes and of Bacon. Though it is not my custom to uncover the errors of others, I do also want to comply with your wishes. *The first and greatest error is that they have wandered so far from knowledge of the first cause and origin of all things.* Second, they did not know the true nature of the human Mind. Third, they never grasped the true cause of error. Only those lacking any education or desire for knowledge will fail to see how necessary the true knowledge of these three things is. (Spinoza, Ep. 2l IV/8/16-26, emphasis added)

What kind of psychological constitution allowed the completely unknown, twenty-nine-year-old Spinoza to describe the most important philosopher of his day as having a poor metaphysics ('knowledge of the first cause'), a poor philosophy of mind, and a poor epistemology ('true cause of error') is an intriguing question in itself. Still, this very early text shows quite clearly that the Cartesian conception of God, being for Spinoza deeply erroneous and far removed from truth, could not serve the latter as a proper point of departure for his own philosophy.

What are Douglas's reasons for thinking that Spinoza relied on the Cartesian conception of God in order to draw his own radical conclusions? If I understand Douglas correctly, he thinks that the Cartesian conception of God's superabundant power 'provided Spinoza with the means of challenging the belief that there is contingency in things' (p. 83). According to Douglas, there cannot be any privation in the exercise of God's superabundant power (p. 83). Still, even if we grant Douglas the last claim, the inference to necessitarianism is far from obvious. Moreover, Spinoza's actual argument for necessitarianism (in E1p33d) makes no reference to God's superabundant power, and I suspect that Spinoza was not particularly sympathetic to the Cartesian conception of God's superabundant power. Consider the following passage from the beginning of Part II of the *Ethics*:

By God's power ordinary people [*vulgus*] understand God's free will and his right over all things which are, things which on that account are commonly considered to be contingent. For they say that God has the power of destroying all things and reducing them to nothing. Further, they very often compare God's power with the power of Kings. (E2p3s)

Surprising as it may sound, I believe that the ‘*vulgus*’ referred to in the above passage are primarily Descartes and his followers. Recall the passage from Descartes discussion of the creation of the eternal truths with which we began this review. In that passage, Descartes asserts God’s free will and right over all things. We also observed Descartes writing to Mersenne that God ‘lays laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom’. Both Cartesian texts were in Spinoza’s library, and we have clear evidence that Spinoza studied carefully both the Objections and Replies and Descartes correspondence. Is the perfect fit of the views of Descartes and those of the *vulgus* in E2p3s a mere coincidence? It is virtually impossible to rule out the possibility of coincidences of such a kind. Thus, my only reply to those who believe in this coincidence is just: ‘Blessed are the innocents’.

I have learned much from Douglas excellent book, and I feel very indebted to him for drawing my attention to important aspects of Spinoza’s intellectual background which were under my radar. It was a pleasure to study this book, and it is a pleasure to engage with it in critical dialogue.

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## Abbreviations

### Descartes Editions

- AT *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Edited by Adam and Tannery. Cited by volume and page number
- CSM *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Edited and translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch (third volume also edited by A. Kenny).

### Spinoza's Works

Unless otherwise marked, all quotes from Spinoza's works and letters are from Curley's translation. I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition (*Spinoza Opera*, 4 volumes (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925)) for the Latin text of Spinoza. Passages in the *Ethics* are referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or 'demonstration' (in all other cases). Hence, E1d3 is the third definition of part 1 and E1p16d is the demonstration of proposition 16 of part 1.

- TIE *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*],
- DPP *Descartes Principles of Philosophy* [*Renati des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I & II*],
- CM *Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Cogitata Metaphysica*],
- KV *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being* [*Korte Verhandeling van God de Mensch en deszelfs Welstand*],
- TTP *Theological-Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*],
- Ep. *Letters*.