

Alexander X. Douglas

Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism: Philosophy and Theology. Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York 2015, viii + 184 pp. ISBN 9780198732501. £ 30; US\$ 50.

In this study Alexander Douglas offers a lucid argument for reading Spinoza's philosophical *oeuvre* as a challenge to the Dutch Cartesian thesis of the separation of theology and philosophy. The first chapter on 'natural theology'—a term Douglas uses primarily in parallel with 'natural philosophy,' and thus a 'theology of nature' (viz. 'Mosaic physics'), rather than knowledge of God revealed in nature—does an excellent job of demonstrating how the debate over substantial forms during the so-called Utrecht crisis of the 1640s formed not just a philosophical but a theological problem, and exposed the Cartesian camp to charges of impiety. Chapter two then details how the Dutch Cartesian network responded to such charges by insisting that theology and philosophy ought to be separated and therefore do not threaten each other, a thesis which found sufficient support for Cartesianism to make some inroads into the Dutch universities over the course of the following decades. Insisting, however, that this thesis could not consistently be maintained, Douglas demonstrates in chapter three how Spinoza in his 1663 *Metaphysical Thoughts* indeed drew out implications of Descartes's metaphysics pertaining directly to God. This compromised the Dutch Cartesians to the extent that Spinoza now vindicated the prophecies uttered all along by the likes of the orthodox theologian Gisbertus Voetius about the danger of Descartes's philosophy. A fourth chapter illustrates how also Spinoza's second published work, the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), formulated an attack on the separation thesis, insofar as it recast Scripture as a source of moral teachings rather than speculative truths, and identified the latter as being the province not of theology (as the Dutch Cartesians believed) but philosophy. Yet the most devastating attack, detailed in chapter five, was reserved for Spinoza's masterpiece, the posthumously published *Ethics* (1677), whose early arguments, as Douglas details, were based on an innate idea of God. An epilogue then argues that the Cartesians' own commitment to innate ideas (whose principled refutation is *de facto* nearly impossible) placed the Newtonians in a better situation to respond to Spinoza, although on the contrary the empiricism of the latter left them without recourse to a wholesale refutation—a circumstance that, as Douglas suggests, serves to explain the accusations of closet Spinozism levelled against a number of Newtonians.

This work no doubt represents an important contribution to the growing literature on the complex relationship between Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians. It combines penetrating philosophical insight with historical sensitivity, as Douglas moves not only between Spinoza and the Cartesians, but also the lat-

ter's master (Descartes) and nemeses (the orthodox followers of Voetius). One feature that particularly recommends this work is Douglas's ability to formulate succinctly what really was at stake in these debates, in a way that is accessible also to the uninitiated.

Here and there one might have wished for greater precision. It is not entirely clear, for example, how it follows that Voetius "had implied that faith was not sufficient to ground piety and religion without help from philosophy," by supposing "that a new natural philosophy could have any effect on people's piety" (p. 57). Furthermore, Douglas goes on to charge that Voetius's view was contrary to the standard Reformed position, according to which "humans grasp spiritual truth with the special help of the Holy Spirit *rather than through* their own reasoning processes." So too Wollebius is cited to the effect that the natural human faculties are "*unnecessary for* guaranteeing faith" (p. 58; italics mine). Yet the role of the faculties for faith and conversion in Reformed thinking is greater than the above passages seem to suggest, and the discussion would have benefited from a work like Aza Goudriaan's *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750* (Leiden, 2006). One also wonders about the validity of the construal of the Cartesian claim that "Voetian natural theology was not a crucial component of religious faith" as "itself a theological claim," and thus an argument *against* the separation thesis because it shows "that Cartesian philosophy was not theologically neutral or irrelevant at all" (p. 62). Douglas similarly sees his charge vindicated in that "the Dutch Cartesians effectively did intervene in theology insofar as they supported the Cocceian approach" (p. 62). From a historical perspective this is unsatisfying, as it appears to turn a 'Cartesian theologian' into a *de facto* oxymoron, and leaves no room for the likes of Francis Burman, pastor and theological professor of *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*-fame. The suggestion seems to be that the separation thesis implies a ban on all theological pronouncements for Cartesians. Yet an examination of Burman's commentary on the famous episode of the sun standing still in Joshua 10, for instance, would no doubt have suggested a slightly different account of the separation thesis.

One might therefore quibble on particular points of Douglas's argument, while still buying into his overall thesis. If there is a serious problem, it is rather the author's obvious struggles with original language texts, epitomized by a footnote where a Greek term is omitted from the quoted passage with the remark: "I couldn't make out this word" (p. 96 n. 18)—although a brief look at an index of Greek printed ligatures (e.g., Ingram, or Wallace) would have solved the riddle easily enough (ἐνυπόστατος). So too many Latin translations are at best shaky (e.g., p. 39 at n. 15; p. 40 at n. 18; p. 41 at n. 19; p. 54 at n. 64; p. 57 at n. 74; p. 94 at n. 8; p. 97 at n. 19). On the whole these issues do not derogate

from Douglas's overall narrative, but they remain distracting, at times to the point of embarrassment. A particularly illustrative example is a translation from Wittich's *Dissertationes duae* (1653), where the clause *aliis non paucis in Scriptura intellectu difficilibus* is rendered "other things in Scripture that are *not at all hard to understand*" (p. 96 n. 16), although, as the context alone ought to have made very clear, it actually means quite the opposite, namely: "*not a few* other things in Scripture that are *hard to understand*." A further problem with this quotation, whose translation is deficient on several other points as well, is its use as an expression of Wittich's own view, although in fact he is anticipating an objection to it. This too is a language issue, as the opening clause *Sed promta hic est exceptio* was erroneously translated as: "But immediately I make this qualification," instead of: "But at this point an objection is raised"—to which Wittich then offers two counter-arguments in the following pages.

These translation issues are of course the author's responsibility. Nevertheless, in my opinion also the publisher along with its peer reviewers, who are profusely thanked for their "diligence, fairness, and brilliance" (p. v), must be made to shoulder part of the blame for such basic errors that detract from an otherwise excellent and insightful book.

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