

REVIEW: ALEXANDER X. DOUGLAS. *SPINOZA AND DUTCH CARTESIANISM*. OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. 192 PAGES; \$47.50/HARDCOVER.

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Alexander Douglas' *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism* expertly chronicles the philosophical climate of Dutch early modernism. The work centers on the thesis that much of Spinoza's *oeuvre* attacks core tenants of his intellectual contemporaries—the Dutch Cartesians. While Douglas' objective at first appears narrow in focus his method of thoroughly situating the reader within the historical context insures insightful engagement with a wide variety of topics. By centering the work on Spinoza's disagreements with the tenants of the Dutch Cartesian, we are able to glean a novel perspective that avoids rehashing common anecdotes found in Spinoza scholarship that overly focus on his clashes with the Sephardic Jewish community of Amsterdam and Talmud Torah congregation's writ of *cherem* (expulsion/excommunication), his failed business dealings, or his involvement with the Collegians sect.

The book begins with the watershed moment, involving Dutch universities' struggle accepting Descartes' radical new worldview. The epicenter of this crisis was Utrecht University where Henricus Regius and subsequent professors began promoting and adopting Cartesian physics to the great alarm of the Scholastics, led by Gisbertus Voetuis, who fought to maintain the hegemony of traditional natural theology based in Aristotle and scriptural interpretations.

Remarkably, Douglas demonstrates that this conflict was sparked by an apparently minor point of contention: "How we are to understand actions of non-human living creatures?"¹ The traditional view was that animals are sentient, experiencing pain, pleasure, enjoyment, and suffering. Thus, God by providing for their needs demonstrates his benevolence. Whereas, the Cartesians believed in humanity's incapacity to prove that animals have rich inner-

¹ Alexander Douglas, *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015) 12.

mental lives. Instead, they speculated that animal behavior could be explained purely automatically, as robotic corpuscular interactions of body parts and environment.

Thus, per the Cartesians, God cannot demonstrate his natural benevolence toward animals because as non-sentient entities they lack the requisite needs or desires necessary for a providential creator to be able to succor or satisfy. This seemingly small idea had dramatic repercussions, it undermines the concept of substantial form (that everything has an inherent, intelligible, and essential explanation), promotes occasionalism (the belief that only God has causal power), and most worrisomely, it challenges natural theology (the belief that we can come to understand God by studying nature).

Douglas explains, how troubled by the theological implications of their philosophical position, the Dutch Cartesians opted to assuage concerns by advocating a sharp disciplinary distinction between philosophy and theology. This “separation thesis” held that “theologians, politicians, lawyers, and even medical practitioners work with knowledge derived from ‘common experience’ and not knowledge derived from philosophy.”²

Johannes De Raey’s adoption of this strategy protected the “higher faculties” in the universities from being infected by radical doubt. Concurrently, the emphasis of philosophy’s practical irrelevance and its theological innocence shielded the Dutch Cartesians from charges of impiety. Interestingly, from a historical perspective, the separation thesis presages Kant and Kierkegaard’s position that faith should never be founded on reason.

Douglas’ trenchant narrative reveals that just as the separation thesis gained credibility, political support, and general acceptance within Dutch universities’ curriculum, Spinoza attacked the possibility of ever parting philosophy and theology. The Dutch Cartesians tried to avoid metaphysical discussions, which could bridge the gap between theology and philosophy. But, contrary to their avowed position, Descartes had left metaphysical insinuations scattered throughout his system and Spinoza sought to develop these hints into a full-fledged Cartesian natural theology. “Spinoza built up what could be called a Cartesian natural theology.”³

Descartes and Spinoza both held that our innate ideas endowed us with “clear and distinct” knowledge of God. These innate ideas are understood “clearly and distinctly” utilizing the “light of reason”; as such, philosophical and metaphysical speculation affords us comprehension of the true nature of God independent of scripture. This conclusion is in direct opposition of the separation thesis, as for Descartes and Spinoza, philosophical reasoning is the vehicle that conveys

² Ibid: 37.

³ Ibid: 64.

theological understanding, the two disciplines are intimately intertwined. By developing a Cartesian natural theology free of scripture, Spinoza epitomizes and embodies the gravest fears of his intellectual contemporaries.

But as Douglas emphasizes, Spinoza went even further and argued that scripture reveals very little about true theology as they were written as inaccurate and overly simplified means of helping the unsophisticated layman live piously. “Spinoza argued that scripture does not bother teaching people detailed theological truths, as for their theological beliefs to be conducive to piety it is not necessary that they be precisely true.”⁴

For Spinoza there are few tenants of faith that one must believe to achieve salvation; essentially the only two requirements are a belief in God and the beneficent treatment of others. In fact, he went so far as to completely undermine the separation thesis by asserting that we come to understand God not through scripture, but through the “natural light of reason” (philosophy) wherein we grasp that God is nature and vice versa. “The scheme of knowledge proposed by the ethics made it quite impossible to have knowledge of natural things without entailing knowledge of God.”⁵

In the concluding chapters Douglas explains how Dutch Cartesians, such as Christoph Wittich, attempted to refute Spinoza and salvage Descartes. Douglas does an adequate job of explaining in detail the failure of these arguments. However, at times, these discussions feel pedantic, overly technical, and a bit removed from the main narrative. But, thankfully, there is a worthwhile insight that the book aptly brings to light, in which Douglas explains how the Cartesians’ reliance on innate ideas methodologically forecloses for them the possibility of ever effectively rebutting Spinoza. As, philosophical systems derived from innate ideas are patently immune from attack by similarly innately originated theories: “allowing arguments to be built on innate ideas [...] are philosophically unsatisfying because it could lead to philosophical stalemates between internally consistent but mutually exclusive systems built on irreconcilable innate ideas.”⁶

The work ends with an astute epilogue explaining how the debate between Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians was somewhat swept aside, when the late 17th century intellectual establishment became enthralled with new empirical methodologies, exemplified by the natural philosophy of John Locke and the scientific achievements of Isaac Newton. Dutch Newtonians ably challenged Spinozism using empirical methods supplemented with a multitude of new scientific discoveries and demonstrations. However, Douglas—utilizing often used attacks against empiricism, such as the Duhem-Quine thesis (that observation

⁴ Ibid: 93.

⁵ Ibid: 114.

⁶ Ibid: 146.

underdetermines theory) and Hume's problem of induction (that there is no reason why the future must resemble the past)—illuminates that while empiricism can confront Spinoza's method, it is unable to definitively disprove his conclusions.

Also, like Spinozism, empiricism is conceptually unwilling (or unable) to maintain the separation thesis. "For the Newtonians there was no such separation. Theological ideas may form part of a theory that, as a whole, can be accepted or rejected on the basis of exposure to observation."⁷ Therefore, Douglas sensibly maintains that it appears as although Spinoza was right in arguing that philosophy, theology, science, or any domain of human knowledge can never be held entirely separate from insights and conclusions reached in other disciplines. But, as the epilogue emphasizes, the problem with a philosophy based in innate ideas is its incorrigibility in the face of countervailing insights and observations.

Beyond the central narrative, *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism* makes numerous and wide-ranging insights into issues of contemporary relevance, which I will briefly list. First, the review of substantial form and the traditional belief that science needs to show its purpose not just its method helps illuminate the appeal and pull of intelligent design for certain segments of society and explains why evolution is such a psychologically challenging belief for them to accept.

Second, the scholastic creed that God created nature in perfect harmony "God has organized nature so that each creature, in pursuing its own purpose, also ends up serving the purpose of others"⁸ is still an ecological tenant for many environmental movements, such as James Lovelock's *Gaia* hypothesis. Next, the desire of Dutch Cartesians to collapse philosophy down to basic physics is reminiscent of the logical positivists aspiration of establishing a completely unified and fully reduced science. This goal still haunts contemporary theories of naturalism, materialism, and physicalism.

Spinoza's assault on the teleological conception of God and his desire to limit the authority of religious texts are still of utmost relevance in myriad spheres of contemporary life from our violent struggle with sectarian extremists abroad who wish to impose literal scripture as law as "gods will"; to our political debates regarding issues of gay marriage and abortion at home. Spinoza implores us to tolerate coexistence of different ways of life and to promote peace and caring.

There are many more philosophical topics that *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism* touches on, but I will focus on a particularly relevant contribution below. A great strength of the work is its approach, which highlights that theories never arise in an ahistorical vacuum. By situating Spinoza within a broader sociohistorical context, the reader leaves with a much richer and more complete appreciation of the

⁷ Ibid: 163.

⁸ Ibid: 32.

subject matter. I feel that far too often in contemporary philosophy, theories are analyzed independent of their background setting, omitting the particular socio-historical motivations, justifications, and concerns that drove the scholar. Scholars that ignore historicity neuter and obscure full hermeneutic understanding. Douglas by focusing his analysis on Spinoza's response to his contemporaries, particularly the Dutch Cartesians, helps cultivate appreciation of Spinozan philosophy's central aims; ideas that contemporary audiences would likely miss.

Contemporary philosophy faces a dilemma as more and more information comes to light regarding misogynist, racist, elitist, abilist, and other harmful and flawed opinions that historical thinkers professed. Consequently, we need evaluative mechanisms and methods designed to judge, reappropriate, salvage, or discard problematic theories. While this is not an issue for Baruch Spinoza, who by all accounts lived the very life of tolerance and benevolence he preached; nevertheless, these problematic ideas are a concern for many ancient and modern thinkers. This project is of utmost importance because in many instances these problematic theories represent the very intellectual foundation that contemporary philosophy is built on. Douglas' method of situating ideas within a rich historical setting is an excellent way of beginning this necessary reconstructive endeavor. By unearthing and bringing to life the immediate intellectual environment in which thinkers labored, we can decide whether to absolve, temper, condemn, or at least better understand and evaluate why past theorist held such unsavory views.

A final fortuitous reason for situating theories within their immediate historical moment is that this process demonstrates that philosophy has actually been able to make progress by settling specific scholarly conflicts confronted in the past. This point does not need to be belabored; it is just reassuring in a field, which sometimes can feel like a Sisyphean impossibility, to be reminded that some issues do in fact get resolved. Consequently, I hope to see many future works incorporating a similar historical approach to that used in Douglas' *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism*.