Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I aim to place Spinoza’s famous injunction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, to separate philosophy from theology, in its historical context. I contend that in order to properly understand Spinoza’s views concerning the relationship between philosophy and theology, we must view his work in the context of philosophical discussions taking place during his time and in his country of residence, the Dutch Republic. Of particular relevance is a meta-philosophical thesis advocated by a certain group of Cartesian philosophers and theologians. Their thesis was developed in response to attacks on Cartesianism from more conservative authors, who saw it as a source of impiety. It stated that Cartesian philosophy, properly understood, is neither pious nor impious. It cannot help to answer questions about theology, nor can it provide knowledge of any relevance to advancing human wellbeing and salvation.

Theo Verbeek has already argued that understanding this “Dutch Cartesian” thesis is relevant to understanding important features of Spinoza’s thought. I build upon his work to argue that Spinoza’s views concerning religion and philosophy should be understood as a conscious repudiation of it. The Dutch Cartesians genuinely hoped to separate philosophy from theology. Spinoza similarly claimed to separate them, but he meant far less by this separation than the Dutch Cartesians had meant. He held that what separates theology from philosophy is a difference in the goals they pursue. And yet he strongly implied that the distinctive aim of

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theology, as he defined it, could in certain cases be ultimately advanced by means of philosophy alone.

On the other hand, Spinoza’s expressions of belief in the separation between theology and philosophy were not disingenuous, as a comparison between his views and those of Meijer will show. Indeed his position on this issue could be said to be somewhere between that of the Dutch Cartesians and that of Meijer.

2. THE DUTCH CARTESIANS

Philosophy inspired by the new methods and theories of Descartes enjoyed a period of popularity in the Dutch Republic from the 1640s until the end of the century, when Newtonian and Lockean ideas began to take over. Interpretations of Cartesian philosophy varied widely. Verbeek identifies at least three distinct Dutch Cartesian schools, all emphasizing different parts of Descartes’s thought. The Cartesian school I shall focus on in this paper is the one that was most tolerated by officials within the universities. It was sustained by what Verbeek calls a “network of Cartesians”:

Those who belonged to this network were, first of all, [Abraham] Heidanus, [Johannes] De Raey, Johannes Clauberg and Christopher Wittich, Lambert van Velthuysen, and a theological student, Frans Burman. They all knew each other and were bound by enthusiasm for Descartes’s philosophy and by strong feelings of loyalty toward its author and each other.

All the members of this network (with the exception of Velthuysen) were professors of philosophy, theology, and related subjects at universities in Leiden, Amsterdam, and elsewhere in and around the Dutch Republic.

What made, or was at least intended to make, this network’s version of Cartesian philosophy more acceptable to the university authorities than other versions was the claim that it had no relevance whatsoever to what were known as the “higher faculties.” These included theology, law, medicine, and other sciences directly concerned with questions of human conduct and welfare. Universities in this period, in the Dutch Republic as elsewhere in Europe, were increasingly becoming places of training for lawyers, doctors, church ministers, and members of the rapidly-growing government bureaucracy. Philosophy had traditionally been taught as an introduction to general ways of thinking, before students moved on to study in the higher faculties and receive specific training for their professional roles. Thus many saw in the new Cartesian philosophy a threat that was social as well as intellectual.

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1 See C. De Pater, “Experimental Physics”; Ruestow, Physics at Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Leiden, 88–90; Thijssen-Schoute, Nederlands Cartesianisme; Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch.
2 Verbeek, Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, 151–52.
3 Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, 70.
4 He, born into a fairly privileged social position, was a full-time amateur theologian and philosopher, who had abandoned medical practice for which he had been trained at Utrecht University. He also, at times, diverged from the aims and programs of the Dutch Cartesian network (see below, note 51).
5 “Looking over Europe as a whole, . . . the universities can be seen to have . . . turned out, year after year, the administrative elite of both Church and state; an elite, be it said, on which both these institutions relied successfully for their continuity though the revolutions of the mid-seventeenth century” (Kamen, The Iron Century, 319).
6 Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, 6n28.
To combat this perception, the network of Dutch Cartesians (henceforth simply ‘the Dutch Cartesians’) worked together to argue that it is a misguided policy to teach philosophy as an introduction to the higher faculties. It is only a mistaken conception of philosophy that leads one to think that it has any relevance to them. Cartesianism corrects this misconception. Far from being practically corrupting, it aspires to make philosophy practically irrelevant. Thus the Dutch Cartesians’ unofficial leader, De Raey, wrote in a 1687 disputation on “Modesty and Prudence in Philosophizing” that “the less Theology, Jurisprudence, Medicine, and other such arts, are known by philosophy, that is to say, the less connected they are to it, the more excellent and true philosophy is.”

In an earlier 1665 disputation, he complained that “the Philosophy of the Schools” had corrupted all the sciences by failing to keep practical disciplines separate from philosophy.

To understand why the Dutch Cartesians were keen to make this point, we must examine the specific criticisms made against Cartesianism by powerful figures within both the university administrations and the Reformed Church. One figure who was extremely powerful within both establishments was the minister, professor of theology, and rector of Utrecht University, Gisbertus Voetius. In his Disputations Concerning Atheism, published in 1648 and revised a number of times subsequently, Voetius warned against the danger Cartesian philosophy posed to practical religion. Without calling the Cartesians by name, but clearly intending them, he attacked all those who tried to use a method of doubt to deprive people of their ordinary understanding of nature, in a manner that would eventually cast doubt on their religious beliefs as well. This, he warned, could lead only to the spread of impiety:

For as there is no practice which does not presuppose knowledge, and no knowledge which may not be directed towards some practical end; so there is no practical atheism which does not presuppose some corruption of theory or of the judgment of the mind, and no speculative atheism which does not proceed to the corruption of practice; for in this they are mutual causes, as indeed will and intellect are in all other things.

One key issue was the Cartesian attitude toward what Voetius called “Mosaic Physics.” This was a system of physics that he and others had developed, based on

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8 Raei, Cogitata, 651; see Verbeek, “Tradition and Novelty: Descartes and some Cartesians,” 191.


12 He could not call them by name, since a 1642 resolution passed by his own university senate prohibited the explicit discussion of any philosophy besides that of Aristotle. This placed him and others in the difficult position of refuting Cartesianism without explicitly mentioning it (see Ruestow, Physics at Leiden, 36; Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, Ch.1.).

14 Ut enim nulla praxis est qua non præsupponat cognitionem, & nulla cognitione qua non ad utilitatem aliumque dirige posse: Sic nullus est practicus Atheismus, qui non præsupponat aliquam corruptionem theoriarum judicii mentis; & nullus speculative qui non procedat ad corruptionem praesors; sunt enim sibi mutuo causa; prout in alius omnibus intellectus & voluntas (Voetius, Disputaciones Theologicae Selectae, I.131–32).

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a combination of Aristotelianism and Biblical literalism.\textsuperscript{15} Cartesian physics was designed to replace this system, at least for philosophically minded people (the Dutch Cartesians admitted that the old system was perfectly sufficient for everyday purposes).\textsuperscript{16} They argued that the very idea of Mosaic physics was based on a misunderstanding of the purpose of Scripture. Scripture is meant to teach moral lessons, not to serve as a physics textbook. Therefore it often speaks in an imprecise way, accommodated to the limited scientific understanding of most of its readers.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, for example, Wittich declared himself “against those who wish to forge us a Physics which is Mosaic, sacred, Christian, etc.”\textsuperscript{18} But Voetius warned that people who seem so little to value the Mosaic Physics of the Scriptures, dictated by the Holy Spirit, and prefer their own conceptions of nature and the universe, . . . such people as a consequence cast doubt on the divinity of Scripture and accuse the Holy Spirit of being foolish . . . and in this way they confirm atheism and unbelief.\textsuperscript{19}

In this way Cartesian philosophy was said to lead directly to atheism: it makes us doubt the literal truth of Scripture, and this doubt becomes practically corrupting. It leads to what Voetius called “practical atheism,” involving arrogance (thinking oneself cleverer than the Holy Spirit) and impiety (if the Holy Spirit is thought to speak foolishly concerning matters of physics, why take its moral injunctions seriously?).

Underlying these accusations was Voetius’s belief that philosophy and practical theology are interdependent sciences. Nor was this view peculiar to Voetius. A similar attitude in the theologian Samuel Maresius\textsuperscript{20} can be seen in his Theological Dissertation on the Surreptitious and Evasive Abuse of Theology and Faith by Cartesian Philosophy.\textsuperscript{21} Other orthodox Calvinist theologians such as Melchior Leydekker\textsuperscript{22} made similar arguments.\textsuperscript{23} The physics professor, Arnold Senguerd, in his 1648
inaugural address at the Illustrious School in Amsterdam, emphasized the strong links between piety and philosophy. All of these authors maintained the impossibility of separating philosophical from theological concerns, and more generally theoretical from practical science.

To rebut the most serious charge against Cartesianism—that it leads to practical impiety—the Dutch Cartesians insisted that philosophy not only can but should be separated from theology. Indeed, they argued for a strict separation between philosophy and all the higher faculties, finding the seeds of this theory of separation in Descartes’s own writings.

Descartes had written, in the Principles of Philosophy, that his chief philosophical method—that of systematic doubt—should be used as a way of arriving at speculative knowledge, but not at practical knowledge informing “ordinary life.” His outline of his philosophical method began with the proposal that “[w]hat is doubtful should even be considered as false.” What is not doubtful turns out to be only what can be clearly and distinctly conceived. But it would be highly impractical, he implied, for us to employ such rigorous standards of knowledge when making our everyday life choices. Remarks like this were taken up and elaborated by the Dutch Cartesians into a full epistemological distinction between philosophy and the practical sciences. According to De Raey, philosophy does not seek truth simpliciter; it seeks a specific kind of truth, leaving the practical disciplines to seek another kind:

[T]he truth which Philosophy seeks differs greatly from that which we find in common life and in other disciplines. For the latter is, and should be, related to us as each thing is taken according to the senses, and considering the ways in which it is useful rather than harmful to life, which are diverse and even contrary. The other, by contrast, is, and should be diverse and intrinsic, and moreover known solely by the intellect, which is always the same, as are its simple and primitive ideas, which we have seen to be very few.

One important point is that philosophical knowledge is defined here as being known “solely by the intellect.” In a letter to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, Descartes had suggested that things of leading relevance to the practical sciences—human passions and voluntary actions—can be clearly perceived by the senses, but only obscurely perceived “by the understanding alone [par l’entendement seul].”

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24 Dibon, La philosophie néerlandaise au siècle d’or, 241.
27 Principles I.43 (AT VIIIA.21/CSM I.207).
28 I shall not discuss whether this was really loyal to the spirit of Descartes, a vexed and complex question beyond the scope of this essay; but see Verbeek, “Tradition and Novelty.”
29 [V]eritas quam Philosophia quaerit multum ab ea differt, quam in communi vita & aliis disciplinis spectamus. Haec enim ut est, sic quoque debet esse relata ad nos ut unusquodque habet se quod ad sensus & considerrandi modos, in quibus multiplex diversitas & saepe etiam contrarietas est, quod non nocet sed utile est ad vitam. Ila ex adverso absoluta & intrinseca est & talis quoque debet esse; ideoque solo intellectu cognoscius, qui semper idem & sibi similis est quod ad simples & primitivas ideas quas etiam vidimus valde paucas esse (“Disputatio Philosophica; Specimen exhibens Modestiae et Prudentiae in Philosophando,” in Raey, Cogitata, 642).
30 Descartes to Elisabeth, 28 June 1643 (AT III.690–95/CSM III.226–29). According to Descartes, this is because such things pertain to “the union of soul and body,” and thus fall into a special category of primitive notions distinct from those with which philosophy is concerned. In another paper, yet unpublished, I go into much greater detail in comparing the position suggested in this letter with that of De Raey.
Here one might assume that ‘the understanding’ means “the intellect,” and thus, on De Raey’s scheme, knowledge of such things should not be part of the truth sought by philosophy. The way to understand them, rather, is through applying the senses in everyday experience. De Raey echoed this sentiment in a dissertation on “vulgar and philosophical cognition.”

De Raey noted that this latter kind of knowledge—“common experience” or “vulgar knowledge”—is polymorphous, combining “diverse modes and different kinds of wisdom.” It is largely based on naïve observation, unmediated by philosophical theory. But it also has a historical component. In his lecture “On the Wisdom of the Ancients,” De Raey claimed that the study of older forms of philosophy produced by the ancients, including Aristotle, constitutes what he called “natural history” rather than natural philosophy. By this he meant that the wisdom of the ancients is a catalogue of convenient and useful beliefs, though not an index of true philosophical principles. Both in this lecture and in another, De Raey suggested that the historical work of collecting and understanding these practically useful judgments is vital in the higher faculties, though it must be borne in mind that they do not embody philosophical truth.

De Raey might have had in mind here the category of “moral certainty,” said by Descartes to apply to judgments that are “as certain as is necessary for the conduct of life.” But Descartes, unlike De Raey, did not seem to think the distinction between genuine and moral certainty lined up with that between philosophical and practical judgments; indeed, he pointed out that much of his physics—part of his philosophy—might be regarded as only morally certain. De Raey, by contrast, saw the distinction between genuine certainty and the lesser form as one criterion for demarcating philosophy from non-philosophy.

But in proposing this, De Raey did not mean to imply that common experience is always of an inferior order of certainty to philosophical knowledge. Some of it might be of a superior order. For another important part of common knowledge, he held, is faith. Dogmas of faith are beyond the grasp of philosophy, but this is because they belong to a higher rather than a lower order of knowledge: “[T]hose truths held by faith from revelation cannot also be referred to philosophy, for those we have said to be above philosophy.”

Sense-experience, the study of ancient wisdom, and faith were, then, the various components of common experience according to De Raey. The higher facul-

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31 AT III.692.
36 Raey, Cogitata, 453–90.
38 Principles IV.205 (AT VIIIA.327–28/CSM I.289–90). Spinoza refers to moral certainty (whether or not this is the same idea as that of Descartes) at various points, e.g. Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, 30–33 (Gebhardt pagination). For a discussion of Spinoza’s notion of moral certainty, contrasted with the more general idea that was (perhaps) the one referred to by Descartes, see Verbeek, Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, 75–81.
40 “Dissertatio de Cognitione Vulgari & Philosophica,” in Raey, Cogitata, 348–49. Descartes says things that imply this, for instance Principles I.24, (AT VIIIA.14/CSM I.201).
ties, being based on these kinds of knowledge, were for him completely separate from philosophy. De Raey continued throughout his career to instruct the other members of his network in this line of thinking, as he recorded in a letter to Wittich from 1680.

This separation theory implies that all of the ideas necessary for the comprehension of non-philosophical subjects must come, at least partly, from a source outside of the intellect, since knowledge from the pure intellect pertains specially to philosophy. But Descartes had claimed that “we possess only two modes of thinking: the perception of the intellect and the operation of the will.” In making its judgments, the will can either bind itself to the most certain perceptions of the intellect—the clear and distinct ideas upon which philosophy is based—or it can venture beyond them. De Raey’s view would be that when one does philosophy, one binds one’s will to such perceptions, whereas in common life and in non-philosophical studies, one lets it range more freely.

But when one lets the will range beyond clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes had warned, we are prone to error. However, De Raey’s view seems to have been that the danger of error is either not present or not pressing in the case of practical, non-philosophical judgments. At any rate, it seems that his distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical judgment depends upon Descartes’s distinction between will and intellect. The importance of this will become clear further on in this discussion.

De Raey’s views were subject to many difficulties. He was much more interested than Descartes had been in the question of how practical science is possible—that is, systematic thinking on practical questions. He therefore had to say something about its appropriate methodology. Probably under the influence of Clauberg, he at one point recommended the use of Ramist methods.

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40 “Disputatio Philosophica; Specimen exhibens Modestiae et Prudentiae in Philosophando,” in Cogitata, 655.
41 Letter to Wittichius, 12 August 1680, in Cogitata, 660. The point about medicine is outside the scope of this paper, but is discussed in some detail in Verbeek, “Les Passions et la Fièvre: l’Idée de la Maladie chez Descartes et quelques Cartésiens Néerlandais.” The main reason not to include medicine within philosophy, for De Raey, was that again it does not depend only on the absolute ideas of the intellect. Verbeek links this point to Descartes’s correspondence with Elisabeth; see Verbeek, “Tradition and Novelty,” 195–96.
42 See note 29 above. De Raey did write to Wittich, at one point, that he believed the intellect to be two-fold, such that philosophy pertains to one of its sides, and the other disciplines pertain to the other ( . . . in uno homine duplicem inveniri intellectum . . . ) (Raei, Cogitata, 656). But this does not sound very Cartesian and it does not square with what he usually says. Perhaps he is using the term ‘intellect’ here loosely, to refer to mental activities in general.
43 Principles I.32 (AT VIIIA.17/CSM I.204).
44 Principles I.35 (AT VIIIA.18/CSM I.204–5).
45 Principles I.35 (AT VIIIA.18/CSM I.204–5). But this raises the question of how to read Descartes’s comments to Elisabeth, to the effect that we perceive voluntary actions and passions clearly by the senses. Perhaps we perceive such things clearly by the senses, but not distinctly (see Principles I.46 for an example of this), and therefore while such perceptions are practically necessary they should not be taken as true? I aim to explore these questions in a different paper.
46 See his letter to Wittich of 1680 (Raei, Cogitata, 659).
Ramus and the Ramists . . . take as much trouble to mark the jurisdiction of each science and ensure that one does not infringe on another, as is taken in marking the boundaries of kingdoms and settling the sovereignty of parliaments. 47 But De Raey could hardly be said to have developed a consistent version of Ramism; rather, his sketchy and occasional comments on the appropriate methods for the practical sciences leave much to be desired. 48 Another difficulty was that he struggled to specify the precise demarcation between physics and medicine, and to justify the claim that they have nothing at all to do with each other. 49 

Despite its problems, however, De Raey managed to acquire for his network’s version of Cartesianism, and its accompanying theory of separation, a degree of official tolerance and respectability within the universities. He distinguished their version of Cartesianism from others that were more radical and generally condemned, such as those of Regius and Spinoza. 50 His network also worked to sustain a united front behind his separation theory. For example, when Velthuysen published a work that seemed to apply Cartesian methods to practical political questions, Wittich wrote to reprimand him for diverging from the official Dutch Cartesian position. 51 

The separation theory also gained political support. In 1656 the States of Holland, led by Jan De Witt, published the final draft of an edict designed to prevent conflict between philosophers and theologians. It stipulated that each group was to pursue its science independently and not to get involved in the other’s discussions. 52 This was a political victory for the Dutch Cartesians. They had managed both to establish their brand of Cartesianism as a philosophy acceptable in the universities and to have their views about the separation between philosophy and the higher faculties partly reflected by public policy.

47 Arnauld and Nicole, Logic, or The Art of Thinking, First Discourse, 12.

48 Verbeek notes that De Raey remained open-minded about what the appropriate methods of the higher faculties ought to be—even Aristotelianism might be right. But he was clear that the method will not be Cartesian, nor philosophical at all (“Tradition and Novelty,” 194). Also, Descartes himself can be interpreted as having exposed the deficiencies of Ramism. Ramus proposed, for example, that following true logical method requires one to dispute with others, to “imitate the virtues of the greats,” and to study scripture (Dialectique, 159). Yet these humanistic methods seem to come under attack in the first part of the Discourse. De Raey, to my knowledge, never successfully demonstrated that the latter should be interpreted only as an attack on such methods as applied to philosophy (nothing in the Discourse suggests this limitation). For discussion of Descartes’s anti-humanism see Descartes, Discours de la méthode. Texte et commentaire par Étienne Gilson. For a discussion of the general influence of Ramism during this period see Dibon, La philosophie néerlandaise au siècle d’or. Works exploring the links between Ramism and Cartesianism are Bruyère, Méthode et dialectique dans l’œuvre de La Ramée, esp. 385–94; Robinet, Aux sources de l’esprit cartésien: l’axe La Ramée-Descartes de la Dialectique de 1555 aux Regulae. On Ramism and Spinoza, see Cerrato, “The Influence of Pierre de la Ramée at Leiden University and on the Intellectual Formation of the Young Spinoza.”

49 Many Cartesians outside De Raey’s network ignored this distinction, especially after 1662, when Descartes’s Treatise on Man was published (in a Latin translation by Florent Schuyl); see Verbeek, “Cartésiens face à Spinoza,” “Les Passions et la fièvre.”

50 Letter to Wittich, Raei, Cogitatio, 662; see also Verbeek, Descartes and the Dutch, 73.

51 Frijhoff, Spies, and Scholz, Dutch Culture in a European Perspective, 324–25.

52 Rowen, John De Witt, 407.
These politically charged discussions compose the environment in which Spinoza’s thoughts on the relation between philosophy and theology developed. Spinoza’s exposure to the work of the Dutch Cartesians has been documented by recent scholars. It is commonly believed that he attended classes at Leiden University from around 1659, where he came into contact with the work of De Raey and other prominent members of the Dutch Cartesian network. And, as Verbeek points out, Spinoza’s first published work, *Principia philosophiae Renati Des Cartes* (1663), was originally written for a certain Johannes Casarius (c.1641–1677), who matriculated as a student in theology in Leiden in 1661, at a time when De Raey was the only regular professor of theology. As a result, it seems likely not only that Spinoza was familiar with De Raey’s ideas but also that his own work on Descartes’s *Principia* and even the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* can be seen as commentaries on the ideas developed by De Raey during his lectures.

Moreover, Jacob Ostens forwarded a letter he had received from Velthuysen to Spinoza and vice-versa in 1671. Later the two philosophers corresponded directly. From the other side, the Dutch Cartesians were, often painfully, aware of Spinoza. Verbeek suggests that De Raey’s work in the late 1660s was composed in conscious reaction to that of Spinoza and his friend Meijer. His reaction was largely motivated by the association many people had apparently made between Spinoza and Cartesianism, due to the publication of the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* in 1663.

The latter work offered an alternative interpretation of Descartes’s philosophy, one which, especially in its Appendix, the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, threatened the Dutch Cartesian separation theory. It did so by using Descartes’s metaphysical concepts, particularly that of God, to draw out a number of important and far-reaching theological implications. On Spinoza’s reading, Cartesian philosophy could not be kept separate from theology in the way the Dutch Cartesians had proposed. It is true that Spinoza sometimes implied that there is a division of intellectual labor between theology and philosophy. He left “the theologians to decide” whether God could violate his own established laws of nature in order to perform miracles. He also begged off discussing angels: “For their essence and existence are known only through revelation, and so pertain solely to theology.” But these concessions to non-philosophical theology would not have reassured the Dutch Cartesians. Purporting to stay entirely within the bounds of Cartesian philosophy, the *Thoughts* discussed God’s various attributes; this is clear from the very chapter headings of the second book: “Of God’s Eternity,” “Of the Unity of

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54 Verbeek, “Spinoza and Cartesianism,” 175. In fact Spinoza gave lessons on Descartes to Casarius, which his friends then requested him to write down and publish. See Letters 8–9 and Meijer’s Preface to the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*; see also Nadler, *Spinoza*, 205–6.
55 Letters 42–43.
56 Verbeek, “Cartésiens face à Spinoza,” 82.
57 Spinoza, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, II.9, 203.
God,” “Of the Immeasurableness of God,” and so forth. These were traditional topics for metaphysics in the tradition defended by Voetius, which, as we saw, placed philosophy and theology in a continuum.\textsuperscript{59} The clear implication of this exercise was that Cartesian philosophy had a significant theological application, even if there remained some theological questions that lay outside its field of inquiry.

While the Thoughts did not have a great deal to say about practical theology, it became increasingly clear in Spinoza’s following works that he took philosophy to have consequences in that domain as well. These were expressed in their mature form in the Ethics, a work in which Spinoza drew highly significant ethical and political conclusions out of certain metaphysical views concerning the nature of God and his relationship with the world. These views, he claimed, teach us that we act only from God’s command, that we share in the divine nature, and that we do this the more, the more perfect our actions are, and the more and more we understand God . . . that we must expect and bear calmly both good fortune and bad . . . to hate no one, to disesteem no one, to mock no one, to be angry at no one, to envy no one . . . [and] how citizens are to be governed and led, not so that they may be slaves, but that they may do freely the things which are best.\textsuperscript{60}

It is not the purpose of this paper to explain how Spinoza derived these practical conclusions from his metaphysical principles. But it is worth noting here that the Ethics pursued precisely the chain of reasoning from speculative theological ideas to practical consequences that Voetius had claimed to be unavoidable and the Dutch Cartesians had claimed to be illegitimate.

One key reason for this must be that Spinoza rejected the distinction between will and intellect, which the Dutch Cartesians needed to uphold their distinction between the appropriate methods for true judgment in philosophy on one hand and common experience on the other. Voetius had already argued that since will and intellect are “mutual causes,” the Dutch Cartesian distinction between philosophical knowledge and common experience cannot hold.\textsuperscript{61} It is not entirely clear what Voetius meant by saying that will and intellect are “mutual causes.” Taken literally, it suggests that they are causes of each other, but something weaker than this almost paradoxical notion may be intended. It may mean only that will and intellect are so causally intertwined as never to act independently of each other. Even if it means only this, it would follow that De Raey’s means of separating philosophy from the practical sciences is unlikely to be impracticable. The will must be independent of the intellect if it can choose to exercise a different kind of judgment depending on whether one is thinking philosophically or practically. If the will is not independent of the intellect, it has no such freedom to alter its manner of judgment according to the domain of inquiry.

\textsuperscript{59} Wolfson notes the interesting similarity between the titles of the Metaphysical Thoughts (Cogitata Metaphysica) on one hand and of Burgersdijck’s Institutiones Metaphysicae and Suarez’s Disputationes Metaphysicae on the other (The Philosophy of Spinoza, I.35). Both the latter authors were admired by Voetius. But to me the more striking similarity is between the chapter headings of the second book of the Thoughts and those of the second book of Burgersdijck’s Institutions. See Burgersdijck, Institutionum Metaphysicarum.

\textsuperscript{60} Spinoza, Ethics, II.P.49.S, II/135–36.

\textsuperscript{61} Voetius, Disputationes Theologicae Selectae, I.166.
Spinoza went even further than Voetius, claiming that the will and the intellect, beyond being mutual causes are in fact “one and the same.”\textsuperscript{62} The details of Spinoza’s argument and exposition of this doctrine are too complex to be adequately tackled in this essay. What is clear is that its implications are radical. As Spinoza pointed out, it undermines one common form of belief in the freedom of the will.\textsuperscript{63} It also undermines the entire Cartesian theory of judgment.\textsuperscript{64} Thus he also had to reject the Dutch Cartesian distinction between a philosophical and a practical way of judging. Indeed, the passage from the \textit{Ethics} quoted above, concerning the practical ramifications of Spinoza’s philosophy, comes directly after a statement identifying the will with the intellect.

In the \textit{Tractatus Theologico-Politicus} (henceforth \textit{Tractatus}), however, Spinoza claimed to separate theology from philosophy, suggesting that he accepted the Dutch Cartesian separation thesis in some form. Since this seems to threaten my interpretation so far, I shall now turn to this work and suggest a way in which this central claim should be interpreted. In the \textit{Tractatus}, Spinoza often used the word ‘theology’ as interchangeable with ‘faith’ (\textit{fides}). He defined the latter as “thinking such things about God that if the person is not familiar with them, obedience to God is destroyed, and such that, if obedience to God is posited, these beliefs are necessarily posited.”\textsuperscript{65} “Obedience to God” is said to “consist only in Justice and Lovingkindness, or [\textit{sive}] in the love of one’s neighbor.”\textsuperscript{66} While the word ‘obedience’ may seem to carry connotations beyond this, such as some idea of submission to a higher authority, Spinoza failed to include these in his strict definition here. Obedience for him appears to consist only [\textit{sola}] in justice and lovingkindness themselves. Thus, on his view, faith consists of exactly those beliefs that are necessary for motivating one to be just and charitable to one’s neighbor. Also, he pointed out, this does not require the beliefs in question to be true.\textsuperscript{67}

As we have seen, however, the \textit{Ethics} provided both ideas about the nature of God and ideas about how we can learn to “hate no one, disesteem no one, mock no one, be angry at no one, envy no one,” and so on. The latter teaching seems to meet Spinoza’s definition of ‘obedience,’ while the former consists of a number of beliefs about God. Spinoza did not explicitly suggest that between these two teachings there is the kind of strong entailment described in his definition of faith in the \textit{Tractatus}—that is, that one cannot have the obedience without the beliefs, nor the beliefs without the obedience. But it is easy to imagine that, if one is strongly committed to a Cartesian-type project of believing nothing except what can be rationally justified according to a rigorous standard, one might well end up in a position such that obedience is unachievable except by way of the beliefs about God systematically demonstrated in the \textit{Ethics}. And, if one is also keen to follow all

\textsuperscript{62}Voluntas, & intellectus unum, & idem sunt (\textit{Ethics} I, p.49c [G II.131]).
\textsuperscript{63}\textit{Ethics} I, p.49s.
\textsuperscript{64}A discussion of the negative implications this doctrine has for the Cartesian theory of judgment can be found in last chapter of Verbeek, \textit{Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise}, esp. 154–55; see also Curley, “Descartes, Spinoza and the Ethics of Belief.”
\textsuperscript{65}Spinoza, \textit{Tractatus Theologico-Politicus}, 175.
\textsuperscript{66}… obedientiam in sola justitia, & Charitate, sive amore egna proximum consistere (G III.177).
\textsuperscript{67}Faith “does not explicitly require true tenets, but only such tenets as are necessary for obedience, which strengthen our hearts in love towards our neighbors” (G III.176).
of one’s beliefs to their logical conclusion, it will happen that one cannot sustain such beliefs without seeing the rightness of obedience.

It is clear enough that Spinoza did suppose it possible that somebody could end up in such a rigorously intellectualist position. Most of us, he admitted, do most of our practical thinking using our imagination, that is, roughly, thinking in terms of stories, pictures, feelings, and whatever experiences we happen to have had. The more one is able to think in this way, Spinoza contended, the less one is able to think using the intellect—using sound philosophical reasoning. But the converse is also true. The more one is able to use the intellect the less powerful one’s imagination becomes:

For those who have the most powerful imaginations are less able to grasp things by pure intellect. And conversely, those who are more capable in their intellect, and who cultivate it most, have a more moderate power of imagining.68

It is at least possible, then, that one could, by increasingly cultivating the intellect, come to depend on it almost exclusively. Nor, given the unity of will and intellect discussed above, could one hope—as perhaps De Raey’s ideal philosopher would—to develop a robust intellect while retaining the capacity to make practical judgments independently of it.69 And so it seems that one could end up in just the position described above: holding only those beliefs that meet a rigorous intellectual standard and following them to their logical conclusion.

This makes it seem very much as if in the Ethics Spinoza was trying not simply to discover philosophical knowledge, but, more specifically, to discover philosophical knowledge that would qualify as faith, that is, knowledge about God that people with heavily cultivated intellects will require in order to act with justice and charity. This would be a very particular kind of faith, suited only to those capable of committing to the central project of the Ethics of perfecting oneself through philosophy. The Tractatus, by contrast, discusses faith in a broader sense, including those kinds more suited to non-philosophers who are led by their imaginations. Nevertheless, the proposed separation between theology and philosophy in the Tractatus cannot be anywhere near as strong as that proposed by the Dutch Cartesians.

Indeed, it appears that Spinoza’s work was motivated by the urge to respond to the Dutch Cartesian denial that philosophy has any relevance to theology or any other practically-oriented science. He had shown that philosophy, even philosophy in a new Cartesian idiom, was capable of producing metaphysical truths concerning God and the soul—truths that are undoubtedly relevant to theology. That he did so in a book that began as lectures for a student of De Raey’s makes it almost impossible that he was not aware whom he was confronting in propounding this view. The Ethics continued the push against De Raey, showing that the new methods

68G III.29.
69I think that when Spinoza speaks of the “intellect” in the passage in the Ethics where he identifies it with will, he does so in a very general sense, which encompasses both of what he calls imagination and intellect in the Tractatus (and elsewhere in the Ethics). In refuting the Cartesian claim that the will extends further than the intellect, he writes, “I grant that the will extends more widely than the intellect, if by intellect [one] understand[s] only clear and distinct ideas. But I deny that the will extends more widely than perceptions, or the faculty of conceiving” (Ethics IIP498 [G II.133]).
in philosophy render it relevant also to practical theology; it is capable of encouraging what Spinoza calls “faith,” at least for highly intellectual, philosophical types.  

### 4. Spinoza’s Separation Theory

What, then, are we to make of the claim in the *Tractatus* that “there is no connection or relationship between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy”? Spinoza explained what he meant by claiming that philosophy and faith pursue different ends: “[The] goal of Philosophy is nothing but the truth, whereas the goal of Faith, as we have shown abundantly, is nothing but obedience and piety.” For this to entail the strong separation between philosophy and theology posited by De Raey, it would have to be strictly impossible to achieve the theological goals of obedience and piety by pursuing the philosophical goal of truth. But we have seen that Spinoza did not believe this to be impossible. As far as piety went, Spinoza was quite clear that it could be produced by reason alone, therefore lying entirely within the grasp of philosophy. And, as we have seen, the philosophical pursuit of truth in the *Ethics* was held to produce a great many ideas that are conducive to obedience.

Here, however, somebody might contend that I have read too much into Spinoza’s strict definition of obedience as consisting only of justice and charity. Really, this person might say, Spinoza intended ‘obedience’ to mean submission to a certain rule or law that mandates justice and charity. Alternately, being “obedient” might mean specifically practicing justice and charity because revelation shows them to be demanded by God, rather than for some other reason, such as for one’s own rationally determined good. Indeed, at one point Spinoza claims that “obedience is concerned with the will of the one commanding, not with the necessity and truth of the matter.” Thus, one might hold, pursuing justice and charity following the dictates of reason is not obedience. And in that case, perhaps, philosophy cannot after all achieve the aims of theology, which include obedience.

But if this is what Spinoza meant, it would seem to follow that the value of obedience is entirely instrumental, deriving from the value of justice and charity themselves. What good could lie in obedience besides the virtuous feelings and

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70Voetius implied that traditional philosophy is not only capable of encouraging piety, it is the only safeguard of piety: “[O]nce the idea of God and the worship of God is allowed to go from being honored and unwounded to being insulted and dishonored, and the principles of natural light and rules of all logic and metaphysics are degraded, how shall natural and supernatural theology be restored to their place? Where shall they be sheltered for protection against infidels, fanatics, Sceptics, heretics, and libertines?” (Voetius, *Disputationes Theologicae Selectae*, I.214).

71G III.179.

72G III.179.

73*Cupiditatem . . . bene faciendi, quae ex ingeneratus, quod ex rationis ducta vivimus, pietatem voco* (*Ethics*, IVp378). Curley’s translation obscures this point by translating ‘pietas’ as ‘morality’. Perhaps he wants to distinguish this *pietas* from the *pietas* spoken of in the *Tractatus*, which is not exclusively engendered insofar as we live according to reason. But I would rather say that *pietas* in general is, for Spinoza, simply the desire to act well, and that the *Tractatus* speaks about *pietas* in this more general sense, while the *Ethics* speaks of a specific variety of it.

74One thing that might confirm this objection is the way in which Spinoza suggests at one point that the natural light cannot reveal that obedience alone is the way to salvation (G III.188). This is an intriguing passage, but it would take me too far afield to comment on it here.

75G III.198n112.
behavior it brings about? The fact that a philosopher achieves such virtue as a matter of rationality, rather than as a matter of obedience, would only mean that rationality has for him or her served the purpose that obedience serves in others.26 Philosophy therefore could be said to provide by itself all the desiderata that might otherwise lead one to pursue theology. If philosophy cannot achieve the specific aims of theology, we could say, it can nevertheless achieve the higher aim from which theology’s aims derive their entire value.

This means that nothing in Spinoza’s definition of faith, theology, and obedience (and nothing he says about the separation between philosophy and theology) implies that philosophy cannot in certain cases be faith, in the sense that it functions as faith. While the two activities pursue different goals, Spinoza never claimed that pursuing nothing but knowledge of the truth necessarily results in one’s achieving nothing but the truth. On the contrary, he strongly implied that the pursuit of truth can bring practical results alongside knowledge.77 People whose pursuit of truth is not very successful may never arrive at those true beliefs that also generate obedience (or the practical equivalent of obedience). But the Ethics strongly suggests that there are such true beliefs, and that they are within the reach of some people. Moreover, the more people arrive at such truths, the more they will be motivated to seek more of them. And so while the separation between philosophy and theology might hold in many, even most, cases, it need not—indeed cannot—hold in the case of a person with a highly cultivated intellect and an appreciation for the value of rational understanding.

There are, however, further difficulties for my interpretation. In Chapter Fourteen of the Tractatus Spinoza listed seven “universal tenets of faith,” of which he claimed, “[I]f any of these tenets is taken away, obedience is also destroyed.”78 The problem is that the Ethics seem to contradict many of these tenets, at least when the latter are taken literally, suggesting that philosophy gets in the way of the beliefs required for obedience rather than producing them. This is a notorious problem, which has received a good deal of scholarly attention.79 I do not presume to solve it. I shall only reiterate that Spinoza seems quite clearly to have claimed in the Ethics that the theological ideas presented there, whether or not they conform to the universal tenets, are capable of inspiring just the kinds of moral attitudes that he associates with obedience. Therefore they should qualify as faith on his earlier definition—or, again, if not as faith then as something capable of achiev-

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26Footnote 34 of the Tractatus, for example, says that when we understand God’s law as eternal truth (presumably through reason), “obedience is transformed into love, which flows from true cognition as surely as light from the sun” (G III.264/n34).

77In my view, the idea that philosophy seeks nothing but truth is, taken literally, plainly false. Philosophers of every kind do not seek any and every truth they are capable of finding out. They seek the truths that are in some way significant, even if this means only truths that satisfy their special curiosity. But this means they seek something besides mere truth, e.g. the satisfaction of curiosity. For an elaboration of this argument in contemporary terms see Kitcher, “The Ends of the Sciences.”

78G III.178.

79Matheron (Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza, 94–127) proposed that all of the tenets could be taken as consistent with what is argued for in the Ethics; Daniel Garber (“Should Spinoza Have Published His Philosophy?”) disputes Matheron’s reading; Verbeek (Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, 34) takes a similar line to Garber.
ing precisely the same goals as faith, and to which therefore Spinoza’s functional criterion for distinguishing philosophy from faith cannot apply.

This shows that Spinoza’s view of the relation between philosophy and theology is in stark contrast to that of the Dutch Cartesians. Unlike them, Spinoza did not imagine there to be some distinct practical function that philosophy was essentially incapable of serving, a point at which theology and other non-philosophical disciplines must take over. He admitted that philosophy and theology are separate because they pursue independent goals—understanding on the one hand, obedience on the other. He held that a person can pursue either goal without pursuing the other. He even implied that most people, being predominantly imaginative and passionate, are only capable of pursuing the goal of obedience. But despite all of this, he maintained that philosophy is, in some cases, capable of advancing the practical goal of theology simultaneously with advancing its own goal of understanding.

This makes the mutual independence of philosophy and theology far less symmetrical than it was for the Dutch Cartesians. It is hard to see how pursuing obedience and piety vigorously enough could lead on its own to understanding; one can presumably become very just and kind without understanding deep truths about the nature of reality (though one must, of course, learn to understand other people). But the Ethics makes it possible to see how pursuing understanding can sometimes lead to piety and, if not obedience, then at least something that captures the whole instrumental value of obedience.

I can think of one more possible objection to this interpretation. While the end of Book Two of the Ethics claims that its metaphysical teachings can lead to knowledge of moral truths, there is still the question of whether such knowledge can, in Spinoza’s words, “move the heart to obedience,” that is, whether it can actually cause one to act charitably and justly. It is possible that while the philosophy in the Ethics tells us how we ought to act, only the stories in Scripture can sufficiently motivate us to act in those ways. In this way philosophy might, for Spinoza as for the Dutch Cartesians, fail in an important practical function, one in which only theology can succeed.

It is therefore worth looking somewhat more closely at Spinoza’s view about the relation between knowledge and motivation. He seemed to believe that knowledge of what is good does in itself engender a desire to do good. Nevertheless, he ac-

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80Verbeek (Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise, 114) makes the same point, for slightly different reasons.
81G III.176.
82Susan James proposes that Spinoza’s view is that “our principles are made liveable through the narratives that make our individual and collective lives intelligible” (“Narrative as the Means to Freedom: Spinoza on the Uses of Imagination,” 252). But this is not because he believes that understanding is inherently incapable of moving the heart to obedience on its own; rather, it is because “[t]he true understanding of the world that reasoning provides is in Spinoza’s view extremely powerful, but it is not easy to come by” (“Narrative as the Means to Freedom: Spinoza on the Uses of Imagination,” 252). James also acknowledges that Biblical narratives are a uniquely effective but not always necessary source of inspiration to obedience for Spinoza. Moreover, its unique effectiveness is historically contingent, or, as she puts it, “the normative properties of Scripture are subject to change” (Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise, 124–30).
knowledged that very often this desire can be overpowered by contrary desires. Thus rational knowledge that justice and charity are good, while sufficient to motivate us to act justly and charitably, may not always be sufficient to get us to act justly and charitably in the end.

On the other hand, it is very important that Spinoza’s definition of faith refers specifically to beliefs about God. Whatever may be said of knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge about God presented in the Ethics does seem sufficient to determine one to act with charity and justice. At IVp37, for example, we find the assertion that “the good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater.” Thus knowledge of God, in proportion to its strength, moves one to act in a way that would appear to be a paradigm case of charity: procuring for others the good that one wants for oneself. Increasing this knowledge increases the strength of the accompanying motivation, and Spinoza implies that a sufficient degree of knowledge will allow the motivation to overcome any countervailing desires and passions.

One may again object here that there is a difference between moving the heart to obey, as theology seeks to do, and rationally motivating a person to act with charity and justice. But, again, the important point is that the practical effects of these are the same. Thus a defense of the separation thesis on the grounds that philosophy is incapable of moving the heart to obedience and therefore cannot serve the practical function of theology will fail.

There is, of course, a great deal more to be said about this important dimension of Spinoza’s ethical and religious thinking. But what is clear is that philosophy, for Spinoza, is capable of generating beliefs about God—true beliefs, as it happens—that can serve precisely the same practical ends as theology serves when it moves the heart to obedience. It is capable, that is to say, of playing the role of theology, while continuing to play its role as philosophy.

5. SPINOZA VS. MEIJER ON SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

This is not to say that the distinction Spinoza drew between philosophy and theology was not a real and rigorous one. One reason he maintained this distinction was to mark the difference between his position and that of Meijer.

83Ethics IV.P17 and its scholium. On this matter see Lin, “Spinoza’s Account of Akrasia.”
84In fact, his definition of faith may refer to some kind of emotional involvement going beyond mere belief. The word he uses is ‘sentire’ (fidei ... sic definiri debet ... quam de Deo talia sentiere, quibus ignorantis tollitur erga Deum obedientia, & hac obedientiâ positâ, necessario ponuntur, G III.175). This can convey feeling as well as cognitive assent.
85Again, further on in the Scholium (a passage already quoted) Spinoza claims that “the desire to do good” can be “generated in us according to the guidance of reason.” This desire is piety. From this definition we might conclude that the relationship between obedience and piety seems to be that obedience is a special case of piety: piety is the desire to do good in general, while obedience is the desire to treat others with justice and charity—surely a vital part of doing good.
86Explaining this in detail would take me too far afield here, but see, for example, V.P20.S.
87Some discussion can be found in De Dijn, “Ethics IV: The ladder, not the top: the provisional morals of the philosopher”; Mason, The God of Spinoza: a Philosophical Study; Matheron, Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza; and in many other places.
88Many authors have studied the contrasts between Meijer and Spinoza on this point. Many of these propose that Spinoza’s critiques of Maimonides in the TTP are really directed toward Meijer.
In his book, *Philosophy as the Interpreter of Sacred Scripture*, Meijer had argued that only philosophy can judge theological matters. In the interpretation of Scripture, he asked,

By which faculties should we be led? What helps ought to be favored? By which norm and method should we be instructed, in order to be capable of truly explicating Sacred Scripture and vindicating it against false interpretations, so that the task of an authentic interpretation may be fulfilled?

The Catholics solve the problem by appealing to the authority of the Church. Those outside the Roman faith propose, by contrast, that Scripture itself must provide its own norm of interpretation. But in his two previous chapters, Meijer had attempted to demonstrate that Scripture is full of inconsistencies and ambiguities, and no means of resolving these can be found in the text itself. Thus he concluded,

The task [of finding an authentic interpretation] belongs to the true philosophy, which is the certain norm that cannot deceive us, both in interpreting the Sacred books and in explaining interpretations.

By 'philosophy,' he stressed, he did not mean the ideas of Plato or Aristotle, but rather the (unmistakably Cartesian-sounding)

true and totally certain knowledge, free from all prejudices, sustained by the natural light and the penetration of the understanding, cultivated and aided by study, application, practice, experience, and the use of things, discovered and brought into the light of certainty from immutable principles known through themselves and passing to their valid consequences and apodictic demonstrations, known clearly and distinctly.

This view runs directly contrary to the Dutch Cartesian position. Indeed, it necessitates the violation of De Witt’s edict. If the work of philosophers is required for the proper interpretation of Scripture, then theologians and philosophers can hardly be asked to pursue their own sciences in mutual independence.

Spinoza, by contrast, insisted on the principle rejected by Meijer, that “all knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scripture itself” rather than from sources external to it, including philosophy. This principle of *sola scriptura* was a

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89 *Meijer, Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres; Exercitio paradoxica in quâ veram Philosophiam infallibilem S. Literas interpretandi Norman esse apodictice demonstratur & discrepantes ab hâc sententia expendentes ac refelluntur, V.1*, 39.

90 For instance, Meijer points out that whether the meaning of a phrase is clear or obscure is subjective—what one person finds clear another finds obscure (*Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres*, III.3, 7; see also V.1, 31–32).

91 *Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres, V.1*, 40.

92 *Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres, V.2*, 40. Meijer also praises Descartes correctly as the “principal founder and propagator of philosophy,” and even rests the hope for an end to church schisms upon his philosophy, in the Epilogue.

93 G III.99.
mainstay of Protestant thinking.\textsuperscript{94} For instance, the Leiden theologian Antonius Walaeus insisted that “Holy Scripture is its own interpreter.”\textsuperscript{95} Many Reformed theologians read this as a repudiation of all attempts to employ philosophy in Scriptural exegesis. The British theologian William Ames, who was a professor at Franeker from 1622–33, denounced the theology of his colleague Johannes Maccovius in Calvinist terms (though Ames was a Quaker). According to Ames, Maccovius’s theology, which drew upon Scholastic philosophy, failed to heed Calvin’s contention that the word of God could be understood simply through itself.\textsuperscript{96} Maresius used the same argument against Voetius.\textsuperscript{97} When Voetius appealed to human philosophers in order to explain Scripture, he was, Maresius claimed, no better than the papists.\textsuperscript{98} Thus \textit{sola scriptura} provided a useful way for the Dutch Cartesian and others to attack Voetius and his allies, apparently on solid Calvinist principles.\textsuperscript{99}

Spinoza likewise pointed out that rejecting the \textit{sola scriptura} principle might make sense for a Roman Catholic (or, he added, for a Pharisee), but not for anybody else, thus implicitly rejecting Meijer’s alternative.\textsuperscript{100} He echoed Ames and Maresius in using the principle to oppose those who interpreted Scripture in terms of philosophical ideas learned from Plato and Aristotle.\textsuperscript{101} As he saw it, the great breadth of the audiences to which the Prophets and Apostles originally delivered the Scriptures (and the common lack of philosophical education among the Prophets and Apostles themselves) was enough to show that one need not know philosophy in order to understand Scripture.\textsuperscript{102} But this same argument could be applied to refute Meijer, since if the original teachers and students of Scripture could not all be expected to have known Plato and Aristotle, they also could not all be expected to have mastered Meijer’s sort of philosophy.

By thus embracing the \textit{sola scriptura} principle in contrast to Meijer, Spinoza was aligning his views with those of the Dutch Cartesians, and with other orthodox Reformed theologians. Like them, he believed the interpretation of Scripture neither to require philosophy nor to stand to benefit from it. In this sense he did believe in the separation of theology and philosophy. On a common Reformed understanding of theology, its appropriate method consists entirely of Scriptural exegesis; De Raey insisted, for instance, that “theology is simply treated by Scripture, that which speaks of God, that is, the works of God.”\textsuperscript{103} If it is true, as Spinoza

\textsuperscript{94}However, Spinoza’s further claim, that reason or the natural light alone is necessary for interpreting Scripture was far more radical in this context. On this see, for instance, James, \textit{Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics}, ch.6.

\textsuperscript{95}Walaeus, \textit{Enchiridium religionis reformatae}, 1; quoted in Verbeek, \textit{Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise}, 94.

\textsuperscript{96}Verbeek, \textit{Descartes and the Dutch}, 7; see, for instance, Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion.}, I.vii.4.

\textsuperscript{97}Verbeek, \textit{Descartes and the Dutch}, 7.

\textsuperscript{98}\textit{Descartes and the Dutch}, 7.

\textsuperscript{99}Voetius’s relation to the \textit{sola scriptura} principle was more complex than this brief discussion might suggest; see Verbeek, “Descartes and the Problem of Atheism” and \textit{Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise}, 94–95.

\textsuperscript{100}G III.105.

\textsuperscript{101}G III.9, 19, 167–68.

\textsuperscript{102}G III.114, 167.

\textsuperscript{103}Raey, \textit{Cogitata}, 657.
held, that Scriptural exegesis requires no philosophical inquiry, then philosophy and theology can be held to be independent of each other.

On the other hand, as we have seen, Spinoza did not quite understand theology in this way. While his separation claim applied perfectly to theology as De Raey defined it, his own definition allowed that in some special cases philosophy could achieve everything theologians seek to achieve through the interpretation of Scripture—that is, arriving at beliefs capable of promoting justice and charity. Philosophy could do this not by providing a norm for interpreting Scripture, as Meijer had proposed, but rather independently of Scripture altogether. Spinoza’s position was less radical than Meijer’s, since he conceded that in most cases theologians, in the standard sense, could do their work without any help from philosophy at all. But it was more radical than that of the Dutch Cartesians, since he implied that in the case of highly intellectual, philosophical types, the true business of theology would in fact be fully attended to by philosophy. And since he defined theology purely in terms of its aims, this really amounted to the claim that philosophy can, in certain cases, be theology.

6. Conclusion

Spinoza developed his views on theology and philosophy as an alternative strategy to the one the Dutch Cartesians on the one hand and Meijer on the other had adopted in order to face off the accusations of people like Voetius. As Voetius saw it, the new philosophy was a device for propounding unorthodox theological views. The Dutch Cartesians contended that philosophy could not propound any theological views; it is categorically incapable of penetrating into matters of theology, or indeed into matters of practical importance more generally. Meijer’s much more radical claim was that philosophy provides the only standard against which

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104Meijer himself admitted to having implied that, since philosophy is alone the source of truth, Scripture might not be strictly necessary at all. Rather than directly denying this implication, he tried to temper it with the claim that Scripture nevertheless plays a vital role in guiding us “to think upon the things of which it speaks, to look into them, and to examine whether they are as it proposes them to be” (Philosophia S. Scripturæ Interpres, Epilogue, P. [collating figure given, since there are no page numbers]). The problem is that he failed to make it clear whether this means that Scripture is absolutely necessary for salvation or only a very useful tool. Some, such as Nadler, read him as claiming unambiguously that Scripture is strictly unnecessary (A Book Forged in Hell, 124). But this is far from being explicitly stated in Meijer’s text. Spinoza for his part is convinced that if philosophical reason were the only source of obedience “we would doubt nearly everyone’s salvation” (G III.188).

105However, it is worth noting that while Spinoza disagreed with Meijer about whether the content of philosophy was necessary for the interpretation of Scripture, he may have agreed with him that the methods of philosophy (or at least those characteristically associated with philosophy) are necessary for interpretation; see James, Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics, 160.

106On Spinoza’s argument that “[n]atural reason can . . . make the Bible dispensable,” see Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics, 124–30.

107An entirely different line of response, a fascinating one that I have unfortunately not had room to discuss here, is that taken by the Belgian philosopher Arnold Geulincx (1624–69). Very roughly, Geulincx argued that philosophy could successfully provide moral and spiritual guidance, and that it could do so on its own, unaided by revelation, but that it could only do so after revelation had taken place; see Geulincx, Ethics. On the relation between Geulincx and Spinoza, see Aalderink, “Spinoza and Geulincx on the Human Condition, Passions, and Love”; Rousset, Geulincx entre Descartes et Spinoza, Ruler, “Geulincx and Spinoza: Books, Backgrounds and Biographies.”
theological claims can be judged, since only philosophy can interpret Scripture. But Spinoza held a third position, distinct from both of these and in some ways in between them. It was that philosophy, while fully separate from the activity of Scriptural interpretation, is in some special cases capable of independently playing the practical role of theology.

Perhaps Spinoza was trying to capitalize on the success the Dutch Cartesians had had in making their philosophy officially tolerated. In most cases, in Spinoza’s view, the Dutch Cartesians were right that philosophy cannot achieve the same practical ends as theology. In most cases, Meijer was wrong to suppose that philosophy had any role to play in advancing the aims of theology. It is only in the case of a very rare type of highly intellectual person that philosophy can achieve the ends of theology. Perhaps Spinoza thought it should follow that, given the rarity of these special cases, his position should be regarded as being as innocuous as that of the Dutch Cartesians. Their view was that philosophy is always irrelevant to theology. His view was that philosophy is almost always irrelevant to it.

But Spinoza’s view, even had it been accepted, might not have been enough to make religious and political leaders relaxed about the practice of philosophy. If philosophical ideas can have practical implications at all, then the possibility remains that even if the truest philosophy brings about justice and charity, defective forms of philosophy might bring about licentiousness and impiety. How can one guarantee that once it is accepted that philosophy can have practical consequences, only good philosophy will be produced?

At any rate it seems there is much to be gained from understanding Spinoza’s views on philosophy and theology as having been formed in conscious response to the Dutch Cartesians.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS


108 It seems his attempt to distance himself from Meijer was lost on many; De Raey’s letter to Wittich (Raei, Cogitata, 660) suggests that he believed Spinoza to hold Meijer’s view on Scriptural interpretation.

109 See note 104 above.

110 This problem is raised by Garber, “Should Spinoza Have Published His Philosophy?”, 183. James (Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics, 221–30) attempts to answer some concerns of the sort raised by Garber.


