

Tammy Nyden-Bullock

Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind.

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In this book Nyden-Bullock traces the development of Spinoza's political and philosophical views from his early encounters with the intellectually stimulating figures of the Amsterdam 'Radical Cartesian Circle' through the completion of his magnum opus, the *Ethics*. Nyden-Bullock discusses in some detail both the Radical Cartesian pamphlets to which Spinoza was exposed and the key individuals with whom he interacted during the time that he was developing his own philosophical views. She concludes that Spinoza's political writings were strongly impacted by the views of his friends and associates in the Radical Cartesian Circle, and that while Spinoza's own mature epistemological views were in part a result of his rejection of Descartes' metaphysical dualism, they were also affected by his attempt to develop a coherent Cartesian political theory.

Nyden-Bullock begins her study in Chapter 1 with a general overview of the political conditions and the rise of Cartesianism in the Netherlands just prior to and during Spinoza's lifetime. The philosophical controversy of the time included a transition from scholastic Aristotelianism to the new and exciting ideas of Galileo, Hobbes, and Descartes. The changes included passionate discussions in the fields of philosophy, theology, politics, and religion. Indeed, debates on these topics were feverish and continuous among scholars, politicians, religious leaders, and the general public. This resulted in a change in the status of philosophy itself, from a subservient academic position to a field of study that was newly understood to have its own power and meaning independent from any other discipline.

In the second and third chapters Nyden-Bullock discusses the Radical Cartesian pamphlets of Lambertus van Velthuysen and the De la Court brothers, and the political views of some of Spinoza's associates in the Amsterdam Circle. All of these thinkers are tied together by their beliefs in the views of Descartes and Hobbes regarding the role of reason in controlling the passions and the universal human drive for self-preservation — ideas well known to Spinoza scholars. Nyden-Bullock argues that Spinoza's close association with the Radical Cartesian group provides very strong evidence that Spinoza was thinking about the connection between epistemology, politics, and religion throughout his entire philosophical career. Further, she shows that given the overlapping views expressed in the writings of Spinoza and the other Radical Cartesians, it is virtually impossible to determine in which direction the lines of influence traveled between Spinoza and his Radical Cartesian associates.

The focus of Chapter 4 is on the content of Spinoza's political views and the order in which his political, metaphysical, and epistemological ideas developed. Nyden-Bullock argues that rather than creating his metaphysical

system first and then expounding on the political views that easily follow from that system, it was the other way around, with Spinoza's political views giving birth to his mature metaphysical and epistemological theories. Indeed, in the *Theological-Political Treatise* we see many of Spinoza's more developed metaphysical and epistemological views. Nyden-Bullock again shows the ties between Spinoza and his associates. The central tenets of Spinoza's political theory — that true wisdom and knowledge are based on reason, that the social nature of human beings necessarily entails the drive toward self-preservation, that salvation requires knowledge, and that a healthy society (of which the highest form is a democracy) occurs only through the rule of reason — were views that were held by the members of the Amsterdam Radical Cartesian Circle. She also points out that the earliest version of Spinoza's 'three kinds of knowledge' (i.e., imagination, reason, and intuition), which is central to his mature epistemology, is found in van den Eden's *Free Political Propositions*. Her conclusion is that Spinoza's systematization of Radical Cartesian politics played a very large role in the development of his complete philosophical theory — entailing his metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and political views.

The book's last three chapters trace the development of Spinoza's thoughts on error, truth, and falsity from the early 'Cartesian' stage found in his *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) to the middle 'transitional' stage in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE) and the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (KV), through the 'mature' stage of his epistemology in the *Ethics* (78). Chapter 5 is dedicated to the early stage in which Spinoza begins to distinguish his views from those of Descartes. For example, in the early stage Spinoza still accepts the ideas that error results when the will extends itself beyond the scope of the intellect, that the will is free, and that the will and intellect are distinct from one another. However, Spinoza begins to strike out on his own when he offers both his own definition of the will and a new way of understanding the distinction between the will and the intellect. For Spinoza, the will is free in the sense that the mental acts that we call volitions never follow from causes that are external to the human mind; rather, any volition is caused by the mind alone. Also, for Spinoza the will is the active portion of the mind while the intellect is passive.

In Chapter 6 Nyden-Bullock shows that in the transitional stage Spinoza continues to distinguish his own from Descartes' epistemology, by means of his monistic ontology and unique view of the mind-body relationship. In the TIE he begins to develop his view that the primary goal of humankind is to have true knowledge of the connection between the mind and the body, and the relationship between the self and the entire universe, including its cause, i.e., God. Nyden-Bullock argues that the main problem with the TIE is that it does not complete what it sets out to accomplish: it does not explain why an idea corresponds with its object, and hence, it does not explain the nature of the mind-body union. Nyden-Bullock says that in the KV we find the first textual evidence of Spinoza's denial of free will — a view in

direct conflict with Descartes. Also, Spinoza begins to reject the will-intellect distinction, claiming that if they were really distinct from one another, then they would be substances; and since substances have nothing in common with one another, the will and the intellect could not interact with one another. We also have our first glimpse of the notion of ‘parallelism’ in the KV.

Nyden-Bullock concludes with a discussion of Spinoza’s mature views on the mind-body union, intellect, truth, falsity, and error, and the parallelism that grounds his philosophy. While in the KV Spinoza still allows for some interaction between the mind and body, the *Ethics* completely abolishes that possibility. Indeed, in the *Ethics* we find Spinoza’s thoroughgoing notion of parallelism — from the attributes of God through the entire spectrum of infinite and finite modes. Spinoza makes it clear that parallelism entails identity. Hence, each thing that is expressed under the attributes (whether an infinite mode or a particular finite entity) is one in nature. So, ‘the face of the whole universe’ and ‘the idea of the face of the whole universe’ are just two expressions of one thing, as are any particular finite body and the idea of that particular finite body. Nyden-Bullock also discusses the elimination of any distinction between the will and intellect, calling it Spinoza’s ‘most radical departure from the Cartesian theory of error’ (122). Spinoza claims that there is no difference between singular volitions and ideas — both are simply thoughts in the intellect. Further, since the intellect is not free, neither is the will. For Spinoza, error has nothing to do with the will; rather, error is just a privation of ideas. Nyden-Bullock concludes that while Spinoza’s mature philosophy grounds his political theory, his philosophical theory was largely the result of his Radical Cartesian political views.

What seems to be missing from this interesting and nicely written historical perspective on Spinoza’s political and philosophical views is a literature review. A reader new to the subject might require a foundation of historical and contemporary views on the subject as a primer to Nyden-Bullock’s study. Without this foundation, it could be difficult for a reader to evaluate her claims about the influence on and order of Spinoza’s political and philosophical theories.

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