

# Calvin at the Centre



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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Descartes and Reformed Theology

CALVIN'S attitude to philosophy has two characteristics. The first, as we have seen, is that he commits himself to the ancient quest for wisdom through self-knowledge. By and large he subscribes to the Augustinian version of this quest, that true wisdom consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves. We have compared his outlook both with that of Augustine and with Descartes, who also frames his epistemology in Augustinian terms, and we have noted important similarities but also significant differences between the two. The second characteristic is that his attitude to philosophy and the classical philosophers is somewhat eclectic, as I tried to show in *John Calvin's Ideas*. We need to keep these two characteristics in mind in what follows. Part of our enquiry in this chapter is to see to what extent Calvin bequeathed this eclecticism to Reformed Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

We will do this by raising a question about the way in which Reformed theology developed in the era of Reformed Orthodoxy. The question is: Could not Cartesianism (that is, the main philosophical tenets and outlook of Descartes) have provided a philosophical underpinning for the Reformed theological curriculum, instead of the Aristotelianism that in some quarters at least became fairly entrenched? Or, putting the point more gently, could not Cartesianism have been a more prominent element in the eclecticism that underlay Reformed Orthodoxy? Here, of course, these questions relate solely to the coincidence or otherwise of ideas and interests, not the actual historical forces at work. So these questions are raised in a relatively abstract way, at the level of concepts and arguments rather than of historical forces.

### THE RECEPTION OF CARTESIANISM

It is well known that, somewhat at odds with Calvin's own rather eclectic stance, the Reformed Churches in Geneva, and in Holland, though to a

<sup>1</sup> On this see, for example, Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 54–5, 119–21. He cites, among others, Gisbert Voetius (1589–1676) and Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706).

lesser extent in England and Scotland, pretty soon adopted a version of Aristotelianism as the basis for the teaching of philosophy and theology, though some flirted with Ramism as a philosophical option. This adoption was chiefly but not only at the level of scholastic method rather than Aristotelian doctrine. So Aristotle's account of causality was widely employed, but also an Aristotelian view of the person, but not (say) Aristotle's conviction that matter is eternal. By and large, mainstream Reformed theologians rejected the newfangled (as they saw it) philosophy of Descartes when it emerged in the 1640s on both philosophical and theological grounds, grounds that were (I think it is fair to say) mixed up with a good deal of politics as well. But there is evidence that the degree of entrenchment of Aristotelianism varied among the theologians, and also that some among them were attracted to Cartesianism, again with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some, a minority, found Descartes congenial, though modifying his views even as they appropriated them. We will now consider some of this evidence.

In Utrecht those who held that Aristotelianism was in some sense integral to the right understanding of Scripture naturally enough reacted to Descartes with hostility. One only has to think of the attack on Descartes by Gisbert Voetius, Professor of Theology in Utrecht, following the Cartesian teaching first of Henricius Reneri (1593–1639) and of Henricius Regius (1598–1679) in Utrecht, and then of the Reformed theologian Abraham Heidanus (1597–1678) in Leiden.

One might imagine from the tone and the attitude of remarks of Descartes to and about Voetius that he was simply an antiquarian who was incapable of thinking a new thought. But the picture that J. A. van Ruler<sup>2</sup> and more recently Aza Goudriaan paint is of a person with a fully worked-out philosophical theology which *inter alia* integrated theology and physical science, giving primacy, of course, to theology. To Voetius, a philosophical view that entails an obvious theological error must itself be erroneous.

Some of the complexities at work in Reformed Orthodoxy's encounter with Descartes can be seen in connection with the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. The position of the Orthodox, at least as represented by Petrus van Maastricht (1630–1706), is that the creation of matter occurred on the first day of Genesis 1, and on the subsequent days God continued the work of *creatio ex nihilo* by creating substantial forms. So that *creatio ex nihilo* was spread

<sup>2</sup> J. A. van Ruler, *The Crisis of Causality: Voetius and Descartes on God, Nature and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

over a period of time, and thereafter the creation was conserved, allowing for a clear distinction between creation and conservation.

Van Mastricht was aware that this is sharply at odds with the more evolutionary ideas of Descartes:

Although He had not, to begin with, given this world any other form than that of chaos, provided that the laws of nature had once been established and that He had lent His aid in order that its action should be according to its wont, we may well believe, without doing outrage to the miracle of creation, that by this means alone all things which are purely material might in course of time have become such as we observe them to be at present.<sup>3</sup>

Naturally enough, van Mastricht offers objections to such claims.<sup>4</sup>

However, in his account of the creation in the *Institutes* Calvin appears to write in terms that at the very least permit ‘creation’ to be reserved for the original chaos, and the work of the other five ‘days of creation’ to be, strictly speaking, the development of the chaos:

From this history [Genesis 1] we learn that God, by the power of his Word and Spirit, created the heavens and the earth out of nothing (*creasse ex nihilo*); that thereafter he produced (*produxisse*) things inanimate and animate of every kind, arranging an innumerable variety of objects in admirable order, giving each kind its proper nature, office, place, and station; at the same time as all things were liable to corruption, providing for the perpetuation of each single species, cherishing some by secret methods, and, as it were, from time to time instilling new vigour into them, and bestowing on others a power of continuing their race, so preventing it from perishing at their own death.<sup>5</sup>

This, at least, is how B. B. Warfield interprets Calvin’s words:

With Calvin, while the perfecting of the world—as its subsequent government—is a process, creation, strictly conceived, tended to be thought of as an act. ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’: after that it was not ‘creation’ strictly so called, but ‘formation’, gradual modelling into form, which took place.<sup>6</sup>

Here it may be thought that in the matter of creation and conservation Calvin is closer to Descartes than he is to the Aristotelianism of the

<sup>3</sup> *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. E. A. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), i. 109 (*Discourse on Method*, pt. V).

<sup>4</sup> Goudriaan 108 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Inst.* I.14.20.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of Creation’, in *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 299.

Orthodox. But to be balanced against this is Descartes's reluctance to admit the occurrence of anomalies such as miracles.

In his discussion of the impact of Descartes on Voetius, J. A. van Ruler has focused on the issue of the nature of causation. In doing so he has provided a fascinating insight into the way in which, by the time of Voetius, Aristotelianism, particularly the Aristotle of the Christian commentaries on his philosophy, had become deeply integrated into Voetius' Reformed theology. On the evidence provided by Voetius' essay 'On the Natures and Substantial Forms of Things'<sup>7</sup> he took it for granted that Aristotle's essentialism, expressed in terms of form and matter, provides powerful support for the Genesis account of creation according to kinds and for the distinction between primary and secondary causation. The orders of creation are orders of Aristotelian essences, and it became almost unthinkable to Voetius that such firm fabric woven from Scripture and Aristotle could be supplanted by a more developmental or evolutionary view by the upstart Descartes.<sup>8</sup>

Voetius celebrates this interweaving of theology and philosophy by his estimate of the importance, even the necessity, of Aristotelianism not only for endorsing the Genesis account of creation of kinds, but for elaborating the biblical view of the divine upholding of the creation, and holding in appropriate tension the respective metaphysical roles of secondary causation and its relation to God, the primary cause. The divine conservation was understood to be an upholding and keeping in being of creaturely orders of things which were, due to Aristotle's teleology (as developed in book II of the *Physics*), themselves centres of agency. A cow had a particular *telos*, a tree another kind of *telos*, and so on (mules provided an interesting 'hard case' to this account), and God as the primary cause upheld and concurred in the activity of the created order by governing the various kinds and their members to their ends and, ultimately, to his own end. This is, of course, only one case of Aristotelian influence, and does not of itself signal a general appropriation of Aristotle. Perhaps Voetius thought Descartes's idea posed a threat because of its own hegemonic tendencies, or because of its physical mechanism, but that it could otherwise have been utilized in the usual eclectic fashion. Voetius may, in addition, have honestly believed that Aristotle simply codified common sense.

<sup>7</sup> This short essay is a defence of substantial forms and individual natures. It can be found in G. Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Pars Prima* (Utrecht, 1648).

<sup>8</sup> However, note Goudriaan's comments (116, 120) that Voetius was somewhat relaxed about substantial forms.

Voetius learned of the threat posed by Cartesian mechanism not only from Descartes himself but also from Regius, a professor of theoretical medicine at Utrecht and (to Descartes's annoyance) a somewhat free and easy exponent of his ideas.<sup>9</sup> Such mechanism endangered the alliance of Aristotle and Scripture, because at one stroke it eliminated internal principles of causation, internal forces, in favour of accounting for movement and change by wholly external forces upon inert matter. Since in Voetius' view the Bible taught creation after various kinds, and these kinds had intrinsic powers, Cartesian mechanism cast a cloud over the authority of the Bible. In principle it would be possible for there to be a materialistic essentialism, with the Creator and human souls providing the *teloi*, but in fact at the purely physical level this was compromised by atomism. Van Ruler notes the way in which Voetius astutely anticipates that given Cartesianism 'all created substances would merely be accidental beings, collections, aggregates, and no essences or unique natures by themselves'.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, if there are no intrinsic forces, then Voetius believed that occasionalism was inevitable. For if we think not only of the divine moment-by-moment upholding of creation but also of the divine *con-cursus* of the creation through time, and if there are no physical causal forces, then God, in concurring with his creation, does so not by governing individual members of causal orders distinct from himself (other than humankind, of course, which possesses free will), but by continuing to impart physical forces to inert objects, forces of which he alone is the immediate source.<sup>11</sup>

Van Ruler comments: 'Voetius' insight into these matters and his analysis of the consequences of the New Philosophy is remarkable. It was only two years later, in 1645, that Père Mesland was to discuss similar topics with Descartes in connection with the physical explanation of transubstantiation.'<sup>12</sup> So although there was novelty to Descartes's ideas, in another sense for Voetius it was old hat, a rehash of medieval occasionalism (if not in its premises then certainly in its conclusions), which earlier

<sup>9</sup> Descartes and Regius quarrelled, and Descartes's *Notes Against a Certain Programme* (1647) was directed against Regius.

<sup>10</sup> Van Ruler 241.

<sup>11</sup> It could even be said that Voetius was being unwittingly prophetic of a later Calvinism that internalized Lockean philosophy and Newtonian physics. Jonathan Edwards, for example, who largely abandoned the metaphysics of primary and secondary causality, scarcely avoids occasionalism, if indeed he does avoid it (see Oliver Crisp 'How "Occasional" was Edwards's Occasionalism?', in Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp (eds.), *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)). We will consider Edwards's views further in Chapter 8.

<sup>12</sup> Van Ruler 241 n.

Christian thinkers (with the help of Aristotle) had rebutted and which could therefore be treated with a cheerful disdain. We have concentrated attention on van Ruler's account of the dispute over causation. But there is evidence that Voetius had other objections to Cartesianism, particularly to its scepticism, and its anthropology, and its doctrine of God. Just as important, and what made the rise of Cartesianism an issue in Utrecht, was its potential to disturb the existing academic integration in the University, in which a form of Aristotelianism was a common methodological component in philosophy, medicine, and theology.

The instance of Voetius, made prominent by the controversy with Cartesianism, illustrates how thorough the entrenchment of Aristotle within Bible exposition and theological construction could become. He also exemplifies a distinct theological attitude, according to which it is the role of the theologian, with the aid of philosophy, to fill in gaps in orthodox theology, and to reduce if not to eliminate the recognition of ineffability in the biblical account of things. Ineffability was not eliminated for Voetius, as is shown by his idea of *docta ignorantia*, learned ignorance.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, there is a sense in which he sought answers to questions in a way that is rather foreign to Calvin. For Calvin, too, there are distinct causal orders, as I tried to show in *John Calvin's Ideas*, but he is much less eager to develop philosophical accounts of these, to make philosophical alliances, than was Voetius.

We move from Utrecht to Leiden. On the evidence provided by Theo Verbeek<sup>14</sup> the reaction in the two universities to the rise of Cartesianism seems to have been rather different. As we have seen, due to the standing of Voetius in Utrecht the reaction there was hostile on both theological and philosophical grounds, though it also had an administrative and political dimension. Somewhat differently, in Leiden the 'crisis' had the character of a dispute between fellow academics, starting with a bitter disagreement between Adriaan Heereboord (1614–61), who became Professor of Logic at Leiden in 1648, and Adam Stuart (1591–1654), nominated over him in 1645, and also to involve a running battle with Jacobus Revius (1586–1658), the Regent of the Statencollege. Abraham Heidanus, who left the pulpit to become Professor of Theology in Leiden in 1647, was a more avowed follower of Descartes, and later there developed in Leiden what Verbeek refers to as a Cartesian 'network',<sup>15</sup> in which Heidanus was involved.

<sup>13</sup> Goudriaan 39, 120, 192.

<sup>14</sup> *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy 1637–1650* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> *Descartes and the Dutch*, 70.



Following a change in his own position around 1644, Heereboord comes across as an enthusiastic Cartesian, though he was his own man. The evidence suggests that he was temperamentally averse simply to accepting philosophical views on the authority of Aristotle and integrating them into Christian theology in Voetian fashion. He may be said, then, to be against Voetian ‘rationalism’,<sup>16</sup> but it is important to note that he is not against Voetian theology *per se*, for he endorsed Voetius’ orthodoxy. He valued disputations (which Descartes hated) and encouraged his students to argue and to look at both sides of the respective merits of Aristotelianism and Cartesianism as handmaidens and allies of Reformed theology.<sup>17</sup> He seems to have had a genuinely philosophical spirit, while at the same time being against speculation and the discussion of useless questions.<sup>18</sup> Heereboord defended the *cogito* on epistemological grounds (in preference to sense experience),<sup>19</sup> making objections to the enslavement of theology to philosophical traditions, and defended Descartes both against the charge of atheism and in his abandoning of substantial forms.<sup>20</sup>

In his attempt to set out the relation of reason to faith Heereboord makes the following points. In general, philosophy has independence and so can pursue its own agenda, but its relation to theology is subordinate to revelation (rather in the manner of faith seeking understanding), providing reasoned support for the divine mysteries, which are above reason and can only be apprehended. Reason, informed by the mysteries of the faith, is therefore simply instrumental. These claims<sup>21</sup> suggest a generally more relaxed view of the relations between the two disciplines, and a less optimistic view of an alliance between a developed philosophy and the Christian faith. Heereboord avows the importance of the knowledge of God and of oneself as a starting point,<sup>22</sup> but it is unclear if he means this in the Calvinian or in the Cartesian sense. He defends the use of Cartesian doubt against the charge of scepticism, and seems to regard it

<sup>16</sup> Verbeek’s phrase (*Descartes and the Dutch*, 38, 90). It would, I think, be fairer to say that what Descartes challenged was a traditional view of the relation between Aristotle and the Christian faith. But it was not *simply* traditional, or antiquarian, as Descartes liked to portray it, but was regarded by its proponents not as the imposition of Aristotelian philosophy in an *a priori* fashion, but as a cooperative endeavour undertaken in the spirit of ‘faith seeking understanding’.

<sup>17</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> These and other claims are set out verbatim by Verbeek (*Descartes and the Dutch*, 37–8).

<sup>22</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 38–9.

more as an intellectual discipline for clearing the mind of prejudice through intellectual self-examination.<sup>23</sup>

While Heidanus was a minister he had written against Arminian and Socinian theology before becoming attracted to Cartesianism<sup>24</sup> and friendly with Descartes. His theological orthodoxy was therefore not in question. As noted, he was appointed Professor of Theology in Leiden in 1647. He was believed to have written the preface to Descartes's *Notes Against a Certain Programme*, composed to rebut Regius' ideas following his breach with him, and had it printed, apparently without Descartes's approval, in 1647. In his earlier work he had taken exception to the Arminians' appeal to 'sound reason', counter-arguing that the place of reason is never to judge the faith but to provide a logical structure for it; that is, to maintain its coherence and consistency.<sup>25</sup> This may appear to be a modest endorsement of Cartesianism. But it was for transgressing (by his writings) the resolution of the Curators of the University of Leiden of 1676, in which twenty Cartesian and Cocceian ideas were rejected, that he was dismissed from his post. In his later years Heidanus supported the occasionalist Arnold Geulincx (1624–69),<sup>26</sup> who in 1658 was forced out of Louvain, and went to Leiden, becoming a Protestant and teaching there until his death, though never attaining a professorship.

On the whole, Heidanus' theological approach was more directly biblical than theological, no doubt being supported in this by Johannes Cocceius (1603–69), an early Covenant theologian, who joined the faculty in 1650. Covenant theology, while fully orthodox, was more immediately biblical in its procedure and so depended less on dogmatic theology and the integration of philosophical concepts with it.

In his work on Copernicanism and the theological resistance to it from some of the Reformed, Rienk Vermij suggests that there is not only a coincidence between Cocceianism and Cartesianism, but that Cocceianism may have flourished because of the impact of Cartesianism.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 39. There is warrant for such a view in Descartes himself, as when, in his letter to Picot, he recognizes that he is promoting to the principles of philosophy truths which 'have been known from all time and by all men' (*Philosophical Works*, i. 209).

<sup>24</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> *The Calvinist Copernicans: The Reception of the New Astronomy in the Dutch Republic, 1575 1750* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2002), 320, 323–4. This suggestion may seem plausible, but it must be remembered that Covenant theology was also independently developed in England and Scotland in cultures that seem to have been ignorant of or indifferent to Cartesianism.

Heidanus was also friendly with Johannes de Raey (1622–1707), who gave private lessons in Leiden on Cartesianism and held public disputations. De Raey was happy, nonetheless, as far as theology is concerned, to be known as a Voetian. ‘I am called a Voetian. I am not ashamed of it . . . Voetius made many mistakes. He was a man like all of us. But he had some significant virtues, too.’<sup>28</sup>

Heidanus, with others, attempted to integrate Cartesianism into academic teaching, including, of course, disputation, and they were also faced with the problem of the relation of philosophy to the faculties of theology and medicine.<sup>29</sup> Verbeek says that those attracted to Cartesianism such as Heidanus did not claim absolute certainty for the ideas of Descartes, and if so they were in a position to utilize Cartesian philosophy in theology in a way parallel to that of Voetius’ eclecticism. They did not need to defend the method of doubt, nor the peculiarities of Descartes’s doctrine of God.<sup>30</sup> Whether this amounts to a rejection of Cartesian metaphysics, as Verbeek claims, is not clear.<sup>31</sup> What nowadays are studied separately, epistemology and metaphysics, were for Descartes tightly integrated, since the *cogito* and what follows is for him the only possible route to reliably acquiring metaphysical truths.

One of the more junior members of this Cartesian network of Reformed thinkers which developed in Leiden in the 1640s was Francis Burman (1628–79), then a student at Leiden. He became Professor of Theology in Utrecht in 1662, which in itself suggests some weakening of opposition to Cartesianism there. Descartes’s *Conversation with Burman* is an important source not only of Cartesian philosophy but also of Descartes’s personal theological ideas and his appreciation of the relation between philosophy and theology. We will briefly consider this before returning to the main question, concerning Cartesianism and Reformed Orthodoxy.

#### DESCARTES’S CONVERSATION WITH BURMAN

Examining the *Conversation with Burman*<sup>32</sup> has two advantages: it has a late date (1648), two years before Descartes’s death, and it is the report of a conversation Descartes held with Francis Burman, a rather intelligent twenty-year-old theological student from the Reformed community. By

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Verbeek (*Descartes and the Dutch*, 73).

<sup>29</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Translated with an introd. and commentary John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

this time Descartes had encountered the opposition to his views from Voetius, Revius, and others that we have been reviewing.

In the record of this conversation Descartes discloses some of his views on certain theological topics, as well as his opinion on the distinction between theology and philosophy. When questioned by Burman about the relation of his view of human freedom to questions of choice and good or evil he remarked:

We must leave the latter point for the theologians to explain. For the philosopher, it is enough to study man as he is now in his natural condition . . . With regard to supernatural matters, the theologians teach that this is an area where we are corrupted through original sin: we need grace to enable us to recognize and pursue the good in this sphere. Indeed, almost all sins have their source in ignorance, since no one can pursue evil *qua* evil. So it is through his grace that God has promised us eternal life—something no one would have thought of or ever aspired to—in return for those good works of ours which in any case we were bound to perform.<sup>33</sup>

Another way of expressing the separateness was to emphasize that certain truths depend upon revelation. Because of this, because they are given to us by authority and not certified by reason, presumably, Descartes holds that

we cannot follow or understand their mutual connection in the same way [as geometry]. And certainly Theology must not be subjected to our human reasoning, which we use for Mathematics and for other truths, since it is something we cannot fully grasp; and the simpler we keep it, the better Theology we shall have. If the author thought anyone should abuse his Philosophy by taking arguments from it and applying them to Theology, he would regret all the trouble he had taken.<sup>34</sup>

This looks like a recipe for keeping the two quite distinct, but at some intellectual cost to theology, which must be kept simple, and pretty much confined to the justification of keeping God's commands:<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Conversation*, 21. 2. Descartes's attitudes to such matters fluctuate between respect, indifference, and hostility.

<sup>34</sup> *Conversation*, 46.

<sup>35</sup> What starts out by seeming to be a respectful attitude to theology and the divine revelation could easily become something else. Van Ruler recounts the amusing meeting of Descartes with Anna Maria van Schurman, a female student of Voetius. (She used to listen to Voetius' lectures from a specially prepared box so that she did not disturb the male students.) During a visit to Utrecht, Descartes found her reading the Bible, showing his surprise that she should spend her time on a matter of such small importance, adding that since he did not understand what Moses had to say he had abandoned studying the Bible altogether. It is not hard to imagine the horror of the Reformed at one for whom the clarity of innate ideas had supplanted the clarity of Scripture. Van Schurman vowed never to see Descartes again (Van Ruler 257 n. 44).

However, we can and should prove that the truths of Theology are not inconsistent with those of Philosophy, but we must not in any way subject them to critical examination . . . Why do we need to spend all this effort on Theology, when we see that simple country folk have just as much chance as we have of getting to heaven? This should certainly be a warning to us that it is much more satisfactory to have a Theology as simple as that of country folk than one which is plagued with countless controversies. This is how we corrupt Theology and open the way for disputes, quarrels, wars and such like.<sup>36</sup>

Another reason for caution and simplicity in theology is that God has not revealed to us all his purposes. He has hidden many matters from us, for perhaps, for example, there are other worlds with creatures in them that are superior to us and that we cannot imagine.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes he turns the tables on philosophy. We have already discussed Voetius' reaction to his dismissal of teleology. In the *Conversation* he extends this to divine teleology, not of course denying it, but claiming that the divine purposes are hidden from us:

[A]ll the purposes of God are hidden from us, and it is rash to want to plunge into them. I am not speaking here of purposes which are known through revelation; it is purely as a philosopher that I am considering them. It is here that we go completely astray. We think of God as a sort of superman, who thinks up such and such a scheme, and tries to realise it by such and such means. This is clearly quite unworthy of God.<sup>38</sup>

The only theological consequences that he himself appears to be prepared to draw are from his philosophical account of God as a perfect being, and the voluntaristic account that he gives of God's will. In discussing with Burman the eternity of God he holds that the enacted decrees of God are unalterable, and that it is now impossible, metaphysically, to conceive the content of some alternative divine decree.<sup>39</sup>

Not only does Descartes wish to distance theology from philosophy, he also downplays metaphysics in favour of the study of physical nature:

<sup>36</sup> *Conversation*, 46–7. Compare his remarks on theology in the *Discourse on Method*: 'I honoured our theology and aspired as much as anyone to reach to heaven, but having learned to regard it as a most highly assured fact that the road is not less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which conduct thither are above our intelligence, I should not have dared to submit them to the feebleness of my reasonings; and I thought that, in order to undertake to examine them and succeed in so doing, it was necessary to have some extraordinary assistance from above and to be more than a mere man' (*Philosophical Works*, i. 85).

<sup>37</sup> *Conversation*, 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Conversation*, 19–20; see also 50.

<sup>39</sup> *Conversation*, 32.

It is sufficient to have grasped them [metaphysical questions] once in a general way, and then to remember the conclusion. Otherwise, they draw the mind too far away from physical and observable things, and make it unfit to study them. Yet it is just these physical studies that it is most desirable for men to pursue, since they would yield abundant benefits for life . . . It is sufficient to know the first book of the *Principles*, since this includes those parts of Metaphysics which need to be known for Physics and so on.<sup>40</sup>

Yet Descartes sometimes ventures into offering his personal view of more complex theological issues. So he claims that God's ideas of possible things are not independent of God's will, depending upon his essence or power, perhaps, but according to him they are subject to his will. In his further discussion on the divine decrees, when he says that now it is impossible to conceive of God's decree as separable from himself, this is a remark about our epistemological condition, not about what may happen, given God's sovereignty and perfection, in the nature of things. If the unalterability of his decree is understood in this sense, Descartes argues that God cannot be changed as a result of our prayers. His doctrine of the immutability of the divine decree appears to take him in a predestinarian direction. Descartes holds that though we cannot at present understand this, God is supremely sovereign, and everything, without qualification, depends upon him. He has perfect freedom. However, we also have a freedom which is as perfect as God's, a thought familiar to the reader of the *Meditations*:

Let everyone just go down deep into himself and find out whether or not he has a perfect and absolute will, and whether he can conceive of anything which surpasses him in freedom of the will. I am sure everyone will find that it is as I say. It is in this, then, that the will is greater and more godlike than the intellect.<sup>41</sup>

It is this 'godlike' freedom, of course, that in the *Meditations* Descartes reckons is the source of error.

The main general impression that one gains from the *Conversation* is the way in which Descartes separates philosophy from theology, having a fairly fideistic attitude to it, and rests satisfied with a definite but simple metaphysical framework, preferring to give his attention to physical nature.

<sup>40</sup> *Conversation*, 30 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Conversation*, 21.

## OTHER THEOLOGICAL CENTRES

Descartes's mechanical philosophy came to be of interest in Geneva later on, but here the story is rather different.<sup>42</sup> When his influence began to be felt in Geneva through the arrival from Saumur of Jean-Robert Chouet (1642–1731) to the Chair of Philosophy in 1669, the chief area of concern for the authorities was focused on the current theological hot potatoes: Was Chouet tarred with the brush of hypothetical universalism and of the doctrine of the mediate imputation of Adam's sin, questionable doctrines which Saumur was disseminating? No questions seem to have been raised about his Cartesianism. It appears that he was able to satisfy the authorities as to his theological orthodoxy by separating philosophy from theology, and by agreeing not to teach anything that disturbed orthodoxy. In private correspondence, however, he uses Cartesianism in defence of a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty in his controversy with the rationalistically inclined scholasticism of his erstwhile Saumurian colleague Claude Pajon. In his teaching he was more interested in Cartesian mechanistic metaphysics than in Cartesian epistemology.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, he shared the anti-authoritarianism of Descartes, though limiting this to philosophy,<sup>44</sup> and was more interested in experimental science than was Descartes. He was able to present the conclusions of his scientific work as probabilistic and provisional, and so not threatening to theological orthodoxy.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, he shared this attitude of the distinctness of theology and philosophy with his orthodox theological colleague Francis Turretin (1623–87), Professor of Theology in Geneva, who was himself far from hostile to the new philosophy of nature.<sup>46</sup>

In his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679–85) Francis Turretin illustrates the rather uneasy way in which Cartesianism was domesticated. Writing of the relation of philosophy to theology he says:

Although the philosopher may be allowed to begin with a doubt in order to [undertake] a safer investigation of natural things, yet this cannot be introduced into subjects of theology and faith. They are founded upon certain and indubitable principles and truths known per se, to doubt which is impious (as concerning the existence of God) unless we wish to strip ourselves of conscience and the moral dependence

<sup>42</sup> For the narrative of this see Michael Heyd, *Between Orthodoxy and the Enlightenment* (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1982).

<sup>43</sup> Heyd 137.

<sup>44</sup> Heyd 69.

<sup>45</sup> Heyd 139.

<sup>46</sup> Heyd 165 7.

on the Creator . . . and thus to introduce philosophical doubt into religion and render the whole of theology sceptical.<sup>47</sup>

Other theologians may be mentioned. The Reformed minister and theologian Samuel Maresius (1599–1673), Professor of Theology at Groningen in 1643, scorned the Voetian commitment to Aristotelianism as ‘papist’.<sup>48</sup> Lambertus Danaeus (1530–95), pastor and professor at Castres, Navarre, sharply distinguishes Aristotle from Moses, since Aristotle mistakenly gives an ultimacy to nature which only God has.<sup>49</sup> So Aristotle is deficient in that he does not recognize the priority of the divine wisdom and intelligence of God the Creator. The Reformed theologian Hieronymus Zanchius (1516–90), who became Professor of Theology at Heidelberg in 1568, and who had corresponded with Calvin, though noting the need not to pervert Scripture in order to conform to some philosophical idea, nevertheless in fact thinks that Aristotle is fully in accord with Scripture, as indeed is Plato’s idea of a world-soul, which is in keeping with the existence of the divine Spirit in whom we live and move and have our being.<sup>50</sup> Danaeus and Zanchius take formally the same position, that philosophies of nature should be assessed in terms of the Creator—creation account presented in Scripture. However, Danaeus thought no philosophical accounts succeed, while Zanchius seems to think that there is something of value in a variety of philosophies.<sup>51</sup> So even if we look no further than these three Reformed theologians we see three different views of the relation of philosophy to theology. If Voetius’ approach was incompatible with Cartesianism, perhaps these three other approaches were less so. Certainly it would be a mistake to take Voetius as representative of more than one strand, albeit an important one, in Reformed understandings of the relation of philosophy to theology.

<sup>47</sup> *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. G. M. Giger, ed. J. T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P. & R., 1992 7), I. XIII.XIV.

<sup>48</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Van Ruler 80.

<sup>50</sup> Van Ruler 80 3.

<sup>51</sup> For a fuller account see Van Ruler, ch. 3. The list of Reformed theologians who were exercised by the relation between philosophy (including natural philosophy) and theology could be extended—for example, to include the early Reformed theologian Bartholomeus Keckermann (1571–1609). See Richard A. Muller, ‘*Vera Philosophica cum sacra Theologia usquam pugnat*: Keckermann on Philosophy, Theology and the Problem for Double Truth’, in *After Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).



## THE QUESTION OF CARTESIANISM AND ORTHODOXY

As Richard Muller points out, the avowed Cartesianism of the Reformed theologians Heidanus and Francis Burman did not place them beyond the pale of theological orthodoxy, even though it occasioned stress.<sup>52</sup> But the tendency of Cartesianism was to turn all theology away from metaphysics into a practical or ethical discipline—a shift, however, that was shared by some non-Cartesians.<sup>53</sup>

Muller also notes that as Reformed Orthodoxy developed, and the Reformed confessions became more detailed and nuanced in the light of various controversies, Cartesianism was not regarded as unorthodox at the confessional level.<sup>54</sup> This may be because the whole Reformed culture was adopting an attitude to philosophy that clearly demarcated it from theology. What it does show is that the theologians were more exercised by theological deviations within the Reformed camp than by the threat of a novel philosophical outlook. So while the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675) identifies Saumurian deviations, hypothetical universalism (sect. V), and the mediate imputation of Adam's sin (sect. XII) as troublesome problems, there is no adverse reference to Cartesianism nor to the federalist theological scheme of Cocceius and others.<sup>55</sup> The relative weight the *Consensus* placed upon theological issues rather than on newfangled philosophy is borne out by the treatment of Chouet in Geneva noted earlier.

So our survey reveals that there is a variety of stances possible, and also that more general considerations, such as the relation of Scripture to common sense and the deployment of the idea of divine accommodation, lie in the background. We can attempt to distinguish these stances in the following way.

What might be called Voetianism appears to hold that a philosophical thesis or doctrine is sufficient for giving the meaning of some scriptural doctrine, and very likely necessary. For Voetius seems to have held that an Aristotelian account of generic essences is what is meant by 'after their kind' in the Genesis creation narrative, and a parallel account of individual essences accounts for the intrinsic causal powers of non-human animals. Is it also necessary? Could there be another, complementary,

<sup>52</sup> *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), i. 77.

<sup>53</sup> *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, i. 344.

<sup>54</sup> *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, i. 77; see also Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 89.

<sup>55</sup> A modern translation of the *Consensus* is in *Creeeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1963).

philosophical account? It is not clear. One reason that it is not clear is that Voetius may have assumed that both the Genesis account of kinds and the Aristotelian account of substantial forms were simply common sense. After all, everyone can see that dogs produce dogs and do not produce cats, and that cats and dogs are centres of desire and of locomotion. However, Voetius seems to have thought that over and above the opinions of common sense it was desirable, and perhaps necessary, that there be some philosophical account or other. Does he hold this in respect of all scriptural doctrines? That also is not clear, but there seems to be an impetus in this direction. Interpreted in this fashion, there is little threat to the integrity of theology from a kind of philosophical hegemony, and so no danger of a rationalist takeover.

Second, it may be held that due to the distinctive characters of theology and philosophy, the source of the one in revelation, the other in reason, the two only intersect *per accidens*, and in an eclectic way. There seem to be elements of this in Descartes himself, who adopts a rather superior attitude to theology, and as we have seen is somewhat fideistic about the Christian religion, placing it outside the bounds of reason. Heidanus is more selective, picking and choosing from Descartes's thought, and adapting it to suit the requirements of theological education. The dangers on this side seem to be the emergence of some version of twofold truth, or of fideism in epistemology or instrumentalism in theology.

Third, it may be held that the conceptuality bequeathed by some philosophical positions is helpful in elucidating a doctrine (i.e. drawing out its implications), but not necessary or sufficient for giving the meaning of that doctrine. The terms of philosophy—such as nature, accident, essence, necessity—can be variously defined, and may prove useful for the purposes of theological systematization. Heereboord, who as we saw earlier thought that philosophy's role in theology was restricted to displaying the coherence and consistency of theological ideas, might be an example of this approach.

Perhaps if the writing of Scripture as regards the physical order is accommodated to common sense, one should not expect a correlation with physical theory, much less an integration with it, whether of an Aristotelian variety or some other kind.

So our question, in its gentlest form, is: Could Cartesianism have had a stronger place in Reformed Orthodoxy than in fact it did? Suppose that it had developed fifty years earlier, say? To attempt an answer to this question we must principally have in mind the developed theses of Cartesianism which might have a theological impact, and not merely or chiefly René Descartes's personal attitude to theology. Theologically

important topics in these developed theses are scepticism, the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, Descartes's dualism, his view of human free will, his mechanistic account of the natural order, and his doctrine of God. There is little evidence that even strongish Cartesians such as Heidanus refer to Descartes's appeal to the knowledge of God and of ourselves, much less endeavour to correlate it with Calvin's own emphasis on the twofold knowledge of God. However, if we cast our net a little more widely, we note that the Reformed philosopher Johannes Clauberg (1622–65), Professor of Philosophy at Herborn from 1649, wrote a Cartesian tract published in 1656 on the very topic of the knowledge of God and of ourselves, *De Cognitione Dei et Nostri*,<sup>56</sup> though without mentioning Calvin. However, in his 'Cartesian defence' against Jacob Revius and Cyriac Lentulus he appeals beyond Descartes to Calvin on the matter of the interrelation of the knowledge of God and of ourselves. This supports our earlier impression that Cartesians (such as Clauberg) themselves become somewhat eclectic, and the cross-references between Descartes, scholasticism, and Calvin come to be somewhat complex. Even so, such direct appeals to Calvin seem to have been rare.

Calvin's emphasis upon divine accommodation had a more mixed reception.<sup>57</sup> We can distinguish two senses of the term as it came to be used. The first is very much in line with Calvin's own usage. That is, accommodation is taken as a theological concept whose sense and scope is determined internally, by scriptural precedent. Thus van Mastricht upheld this Calvinian approach, recognizing the place of non-literalness, allegory, anthropomorphism, and even prejudice, all of which may be vehicles of truth. Van Mastricht had quite a contest over this with Christopher Wittich (1625–87), a member of the Cartesian 'network'.<sup>58</sup> Voetius seems to have been somewhat more cagey. He recognizes Calvinian accommodation in principle, but is suspicious of it as undermining the Bible's accuracy in its reporting of physical matters, and the danger of reducing the Bible's role to teaching merely 'religious truth'. Voetius explicitly

<sup>56</sup> It was published in Clauberg's *Opera Omnia Philosophica*, ii (1691; repr. Hildersham: Georg Olms, 1968). I am grateful to Aza Goudriaan for pointing me in the direction of Clauberg. See also Theo Verbeek (ed.), *Johannes Clauberg (1622–1665) and Cartesian Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999). According to Verbeek (p. 8), Clauberg's was a rather scholastic version of Cartesianism. Clauberg copied Burman's notes of his conversation with Descartes and this became the basis of the published version (Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 75). On Clauberg see also Rienk Vermij, *The Calvinist Copernicans*, 257–8.

<sup>57</sup> For discussion of divine accommodation see Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch*, 74.

contrasts treating the language of the Bible as accommodated for reasons that are internal to it, and accommodating its language at the behest of philosophical or scientific views that are extra-scriptural.<sup>59</sup>

Genesis 1: 16, with its reference to the moon as a 'great light', presents an interesting test case. Calvin had no hesitation in saying that the language was adapted to common understanding.<sup>60</sup> The text is not teaching, or implying, that the moon is greater in size than, say, Saturn, which astronomers have shown to be the larger of the two. Voetius took the reference to size to be a reference to appearance but also to point to the moon's capacity to spread light. The text is referring to it not as an immensely large heavenly body but as a large lamp, or mirror. Van Mastricht notes the Cartesian theory that the language of the Bible has to do with appearance only.<sup>61</sup> On this test, Calvin, the Calvinists, and the Cartesians do not seem to be far apart. To say that the moon is literally a great lamp or reflector, that its greatness is not its physical mass but its role as a proximate source of light, is surely accommodated language by comparison with those occasions in Scripture when heavenly bodies are referred to in more straightforwardly physical terms.<sup>62</sup> However, even if there is convergence over Genesis 1: 16, orthodox Reformed theologians were not prepared to state, as a matter of principle, that the Bible only deals with how things appear, not how they are in fact.

However, this is not all that is to be said. In Cartesianism, and those individuals influenced by Descartes, such as Wittich, the Calvinian emphasis on accommodation as a mode of gracious divine representation to us of the divine mysteries and of the physical world in at least some of its aspects, and even the recognition that in general Scripture is written in the language of common appearance, becomes transmuted. 'Accommodation' comes to be employed as a more general rationale for the presence of common errors in Scripture, even the presence of such errors in Christ's own teaching. For this reason a term that had been characteristic of Calvin tended to become a source of conflict in the later seventeenth century.<sup>63</sup>

Descartes's method of doubt itself raised alarm in the minds of Reformed theologians, most of whom came to regard it as avowedly

<sup>59</sup> Goudriaan 134 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Comm.* Gen. 1: 16.

<sup>61</sup> Goudriaan 140 1.

<sup>62</sup> For example, references to Orion and the Pleiades in Job 9: 5 and 38: 31, and Amos 5: 8.

<sup>63</sup> Goudriaan 133 ff. See also Martin I. Klauber and Glenn S. Sunshine, 'Jean Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 25/1 (1990), 7 27, and Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993), ch. 8.

atheistic, since its starting point was universal doubt, including doubt as to the existence of God, and even the cogency of cosmological arguments. This flew in the face of the Calvinian appeal to the innateness of the *sensus divinitatis*, and seemed to put a basic commitment to the existence of God at risk. But, as we have noted, it is possible to read Descartes's sceptical procedure in different ways. For example, it can be regarded as a mental discipline, a purging of the mind, rules for the direction of the mind, rather than as an initial and avowed commitment to atheism. (There is evidence in some of Descartes's texts to suggest this.) Or, as with Turretin, its remit can be restricted. Or it can be a way of establishing an indubitable premise from which to establish the existence of God.

Perhaps the best way to try to frame an answer to such questions, though, is by reference to Calvin himself. Calvin had said that in our pursuit of the knowledge of God it does not matter much whether we start from the manward or Godward side, though in fact he preferred the Godward. Descartes could be understood as proceeding from the manward side, albeit in the taut, theoretical style of Cartesian epistemology. In any case, Descartes was clear that establishing the existence of God 'forms the foundation of his metaphysics',<sup>64</sup> and perhaps it could be thought churlish for a Reformed theologian to want more from any philosopher than that.

Finally, the Cartesian procedure of moving from the knowledge of the self to the knowledge of God might be thought of as a form of the reflexivity that is present in Augustine and explicit in Calvin; the knowledge of the self leads to the knowledge of God, not, in the case of Descartes, in the form of an immediate intuition, but via a simple discursive proof. In this case, as in much philosophy, the knowledge in question is not the rich, affective Calvinian conception of knowledge. It is not even a necessary condition of such knowledge, but the knowledge of clarity and distinctness and, in Descartes's own case, knowledge that is incorrigible. But this is surely knowledge which is consistent with the richer, Calvinian concept and which, if it is available, is worth having. It could even be seen as a way of getting as clear as one can be regarding the *sensus divinitatis*, of showing that it is self-refuting to deny the *sensus*, since it reinstates itself as an immediate consequence of the fact of self-awareness.

What of mechanism? A theologian could perhaps hold at a distance a developed account of physical natures of things. Why should there be a theological obligation to provide a philosophically watertight account of scriptural statements regarding physical nature? So maybe, at least on

<sup>64</sup> *Philosophical Works*, i. 81.

mechanism, Descartes could be kept at arm's length. But occasionalism is more serious. It is the idea of the loss of creaturely sources of efficient causation that seems to have most concerned Voetius. For it might be possible to give an account of divine conservation which conserves inert types of material objects which provide different kinds of material causes, although Voetius himself does not appear to have countenanced this. In producing the efficient causes of changes in physical objects in occasionalistic fashion, God might thereby produce different kinds of changes according to the different natures of the material objects. The one efficient cause might produce varieties of material cause depending on the different arrangements of matter. It is not clear that this would have satisfied Voetius. For one thing, he might have held that this state of affairs would make God the author of sin. But, as we will see in Chapter 8, to preserve creatures with intrinsic powers Aristotelianism is not necessary, for Stoicism would suffice.

Let us reflect on the reasons for thinking that an earlier association between Descartes and Reformed theology that we are speculating about could *not* have happened. To begin with, Descartes has a conception of wisdom as equivalent to the accumulation of knowledge which is at odds with Calvin's view (and of course, with Augustine's).<sup>65</sup> Here he seems to forget his genuflections in the direction of Augustine's theology in his prefatory remarks to his *Meditations* addressed to the doctors of the Sorbonne. Not only does he separate theology and philosophy; as we have noted, he thinks of theology in fairly fideistic terms which help him to conclude that knowledge is only achievable on the basis of appropriate philosophical foundations, and that what is not based on such foundations is not worthy to be regarded as knowledge. As we have also seen, Calvin lauds secular knowledge, but nevertheless he sees it as subordinate to the knowledge of God and of ourselves drawn from Christ. And although he claims the highest kind of certainty for the teaching of Scripture, he is not at all sensitive to the crucial Cartesian point, that it is both necessary and possible to have knowledge that withstands the challenge of total scepticism, and to base all other knowledge claims upon such a foundation.

Although Calvin seeks religious certainty, and believes that he has gained it, this is grounded not in philosophical argument but in supernaturalism, in an appeal to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise I reckon that Calvin is fairly Aristotelian about the degree of certainty

<sup>65</sup> *Philosophical Works*, i. 204.

necessary and possible in the case of ‘things below’, as he is in his externalist arguments for the divinity and authority of Scripture. He may well have thought that no person can wish for more certainty than we have from the ordinary operations of the senses and the intellect and that ‘Holy Spirit certainty’ is at least as sure as that.<sup>66</sup>

Second, Calvin is resolutely theocentric in all aspects of his thought, including of course his epistemology. A fundamental theological role is played by the *sensus divinitatis*. By contrast, in Descartes, as has frequently been remarked, (philosophically speaking) God plays second fiddle to the human self, in that the sceptic-immune knowledge that God exists follows only from the sceptic-immune knowledge that I exist. Nevertheless, although Descartes is not *ab initio* theocentric, he does have an exceedingly strong account of divine sovereignty, though he recognizes that whilst we can have a clear and distinct idea of such a transcendent deity his will is nonetheless inscrutable:

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on Him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of Him as if He were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the Fates.<sup>67</sup>

Although the existence of God may be the foundation of metaphysics, it is not itself a legitimate object of metaphysical enquiry.

Calvin of course does not discuss this precise question. But he has a strong doctrine of divine simplicity, and an abhorrence of theological voluntarism, and he gives priority to the secret yet all-just decree of God. However, he is highly sensitive to the presence of self-contradiction in thought about God, though he understands this in a pre-Cartesian fashion. It seems natural that we should think of him on Thomistic lines, that God himself embodies the principles of reasoning, including the basic laws of logic, in his own essential nature. So this is certainly a substantial difference between Calvin and Descartes.

Coupled with this is Descartes’s perfect-being methodology, as exemplified in his version of the ontological argument for God’s existence in the fifth Meditation, for example. This a priori approach to the nature of God is at odds with Calvin’s more a posteriori approach: an understanding of the nature of God directed by God’s revelation to us in Scripture. Calvin would not, of course, deny that God is perfect, and, as we will see in Chapter 6, there are aspects of Calvin’s thought that are decidedly

<sup>66</sup> For discussion of this point in Calvin see Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas*, 257–8.

<sup>67</sup> Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630. (See also letters to Mersenne of 6 and 17 May 1630.)

Anselmic. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of him using the idea of perfection as a method or principle of theological reasoning, as with Anselm or Descartes. These are important methodological differences, to be sure, but they may not give rise to very significant material differences as far as their respective theologies are concerned.

Perhaps even more important is Descartes's Pelagianism. Writing after Descartes's death, his Jansenist friend and sponsor Antoine Arnauld says:

I find it strange that this good monk [Desgabets] takes M. Descartes for a very enlightened man of religion; whereas his letters are full of Pelagianism, and apart from the points of which he was persuaded by his philosophy, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, the best that can be said of him is that he seems always to have submitted to the church.<sup>68</sup>

Menn attempts to head this off by distinguishing, as many do, between a *de Libero Arbitrio* Augustine and an anti-Pelagian Augustine.<sup>69</sup> But even if Arnauld is correct, Descartes's account of the will is not simply Pelagian. His metaphysical view of the indeterministic power of the human will—a thesis not altogether convincingly drawn from the clear and distinct ideas of his epistemology—is notoriously extravagant. One cannot imagine Calvin having much time for that.

One might try to minimize the difference between the two in the following way, however. It might be argued that any account of the Fall (Calvin's included<sup>70</sup>) requires the postulating of free will in some sense, and that Descartes's free-will theodicy for the presence of error (in *Meditations* IV and VI, for example) is only an extreme form of this, an account of our epistemic fallenness in terms of the excessive exercise of our libertarian freedom. In other words, one might attempt a distinction between Descartes's metaphysical doctrine of the liberty of indifference and his Pelagian estimate of the moral and spiritual powers of the will, and allow him the first, on philosophical grounds, while disallowing him the second, on theological grounds.<sup>71</sup>

One must, after all, keep these things in perspective. Calvin frequently cites Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics with approval, sometimes with enthusiasm, and utilizes aspects of their philosophy in a rather eclectic way. At the same time he thinks that (especially in moral and spiritual matters) they are 'blinder than moles'. If he is prepared to exercise this

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 70 n. 46.

<sup>69</sup> Menn 70.

<sup>70</sup> *Inst.* I.15.8.

<sup>71</sup> Arnauld seems to attempt something like this, as reported by Menn (232–3, 327, 330–1).



degree of discrimination in the case of pagan philosophers, then why not a similar degree of discrimination in the case of a philosopher such as Descartes?

But what of the similarities between the outlook of Calvin and Descartes—the credit side of the ledger, so to speak? We have noted already that each shares a formal, and to some extent a material, coincidence in Augustinianism. Each thinks that the knowledge of God and the soul are foundational and crucial—Calvin for true religion, Descartes for true philosophy. Then we have seen that Calvin has a place for philosophy, and for the arts and sciences, as part of his general intellectual outlook. So in so far as Descartes is propounding his philosophy merely as a starting point for investigating the sciences in such a way as to provide assured results, it is hard to see that Calvin could object to such a project, either to the spirit or to the letter of it.

Further still, as we will see in Chapter 9, Calvin shares with Descartes one important metaphysical position, a pronounced body–soul dualism, and a distaste for Aristotelian views of the self. Indeed, given this, it is rather surprising that despite the generally eclectic approach to philosophy among the Reformed, many of those theologians who followed Calvin reverted to some version of Aristotelianism, or hylomorphic dualism, when the precedent of Calvin himself surely points in the direction of a more Platonistic view of the self.<sup>72</sup>

Another doctrine that Calvin and Descartes have in common is some version of innate ideas, as is evidenced in Calvin's view of the *sensus divinitatis*, which he regards as a natural, though presently perverted, endowment of the soul, and, in the case of Descartes, in his rationalism. But of course the *sensus divinitatis* is not a clear and distinct idea, and, while it may be a theological starting point for Calvin's religious epistemology, as it is in modern 'Reformed' epistemology, it is not the philosophical starting point for everything, as innate ideas are for Descartes.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, although Descartes was accused of Pelagianism, and as we have noted has a very strong libertarian view of the human will, and Calvin is broadly compatibilistic, nevertheless the thought of each falls into the following pattern: each sees error as arising not directly from the creating and sustaining activity of God but from the human will—though in the case of Calvin not exclusively so. In Calvin, the effect of this willing is due

<sup>72</sup> Voetius was scandalized by Descartes's dualism because it threatens the idea of the human being as an individual substance, for it treats a human being as an *ens per accidens* (Van Ruler 186).

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of the relation between Calvin and 'Reformed' epistemology see Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 218–19.

to God's inscrutable decreeing of 'mutable' creatures and his unwillingness to preserve them in their original integrity. For while Descartes appears to hold that the power of the human will could not be greater than it is, nevertheless simple freedom of indifference, he says, is 'the lowest grade of liberty'. The more a person acts in accordance with 'the reasons of the good and the true', or acts as a result of how God disposes one's 'inward thought', the more freedom a person possesses. 'Both divine grace and natural knowledge, far from diminishing my liberty, rather increase it and strengthen it.'<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, the power of the human will could not be greater than it is, and error is due to its overweening power, its innate tendency to overreach itself. This makes it seem that error is essential to human nature, not contingent, as it is for Calvin and Augustine. However, both Calvin and Descartes charge error to the human and not to the divine will—for even though (for Calvin) God decrees evil, he is not thereby the author of it—and not to some essential limitation in God (as with Manichaeism), and so they may broadly be said to inhabit an Augustinian world. One could even argue that as regards responsibility for the entrance of sin they are both more or less in the same boat.

So I don't think the idea of a more general, positive reception of Descartes by the Reformed is wild. It is hard to see the prospect of a Reformed Cartesianism parallel to the Reformed Aristotelianism of Voetius. But Calvin's stance is sufficiently elastic as regards philosophy to permit an eclectic approach, and that is what, to varying degrees, ensued within Reformed Orthodoxy. From what we have learned about the reception of Descartes, such eclecticism might well have incorporated elements of his epistemology—scepticism, the knowledge of God and soul—and his metaphysics, including his account of body and soul, and elements of his doctrine of God, so that Cartesianism could form a significant element in a Reformed eclecticism, much more widespread than in fact it did. Even Descartes's interest in science could have motivated an investigation of the natural world and its integration with theology, even if his specific, mechanical doctrines are regarded as alien to Christianity. That's probably as far as it is reasonable to venture.

<sup>74</sup> *Philosophical Works*, i. 175.