Spinoza and the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic

When philosophers write about other philosophers who are long dead and so cannot reply, they usually do so in order to highlight the relevance of those earlier thinkers to current issues. Instead of studying old philosophical texts whith an eye to the texts themselves, they claim rather that what they are doing is above all of great significance for the current debate. Significant, of course, for the philosophical debate. Anglo-Saxon philosophers are particularly reluctant to admit that they are interested in their subject's past for the sake of the past itself. This essentially unhistorical concern for philosophy's past has produced some fine books – on Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Leibniz, Kant, Hegel and Wittgenstein. But for the layman those books are often extremely boring, if not totally unintelligible. Anyone who does not spend sleepless nights worrying about the problem of free will or the definition of substantiality is far better off with an answer to the question of how earlier thinkers related to their own times.

Take, for instance, the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza (1632-1677), undoubtedly the most famous philosopher in the history of the Netherlands, particularly for his *Ethics,* the book published soon after his death. At first sight the book's form adheres strictly to the timeless aspirations of philosophy as such. Modelled on Euclid's *Elements,* it consists of five parts in which propositions are derived from definitions and axioms – *more geometrico,* as the mathematicians call it, though Spinoza's propositions are not concerned with points, straight lines or triangles, but with God, the human spirit, passions and freedom. This geometrical expression of his ideas certainly makes him the ideal 'philosophers' philosopher', if only because of the unique opportunity it gives the reader to check the – quite astonishing – consistency of his concepts.

But every historian knows that this fascination with mathematics is a hallmark of the seventeenth century. Moreover, only a historical approach can at least try to explain how Spinoza was *possible,* in other words how he could be a product of the Dutch Republic of that time. For Spinoza is actually in many respects an exceptional philosopher. For a start he was a Dutchman, and our view of the Dutch Golden Age is still determined by painters. Everyone knows of Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen,

Portrait of Spinoza.
Dutch School, after 1650.
Canvas. Historisch Museum,
The Hague.

Saenredam, Gerard Dou and many others, and Dutch masters from the Golden Age of the United Provinces are treasured in every international art gallery. That the seventeenth-century Republic also spawned great scientists, outstanding statesmen, remarkably successful merchants and fine seamen is also well known; but when we think of the Netherlands, even of the Netherlands of the Golden Age, we do not immediately think of philosophical achievements. Yet the Golden Age apparently offered fertile ground for the emergence of this remarkable Spinozan philosophy, as well as of a Rembrandt, a Johan de Witt, a Michiel Adriaansz de Ruyter, a Leeuwenhoek and a Boerhaave. And it is clear from recent research that the history of philosophy in the Dutch Republic is in fact of considerable importance.

We might start by looking at the organisation of philosophical activities in the seventeenth century. Professional philosophers today generally regard their field as an essentially academic discipline. One studies philosophy at university, and philosophers *work* almost exclusively in universities. Things were rather different in the seventeenth century. Of the great philosophers of the early modern period, only one or two were attached to academies. Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz and Hume were never professors. Only since Kant have the great philosophers been professional academics. Spinoza, too, never worked in a university. When, in 1673, he was offered a chair in Heidelberg, he declined politely and emphatically. He preferred to write his books as a free-lance outsider rather than a civil servant. He was self-employed and, so it seems, thought too highly of philosophy to become a professor of it; for the standing of philosophy at the university was somewhat uncertain. Traditionally, philosophy was a preliminary course for students going on to read a 'real' subject in one of the three major faculties of theology, medicine or law. It was only in the course of the seventeenth century that philosophy became a subject in its own right and no longer

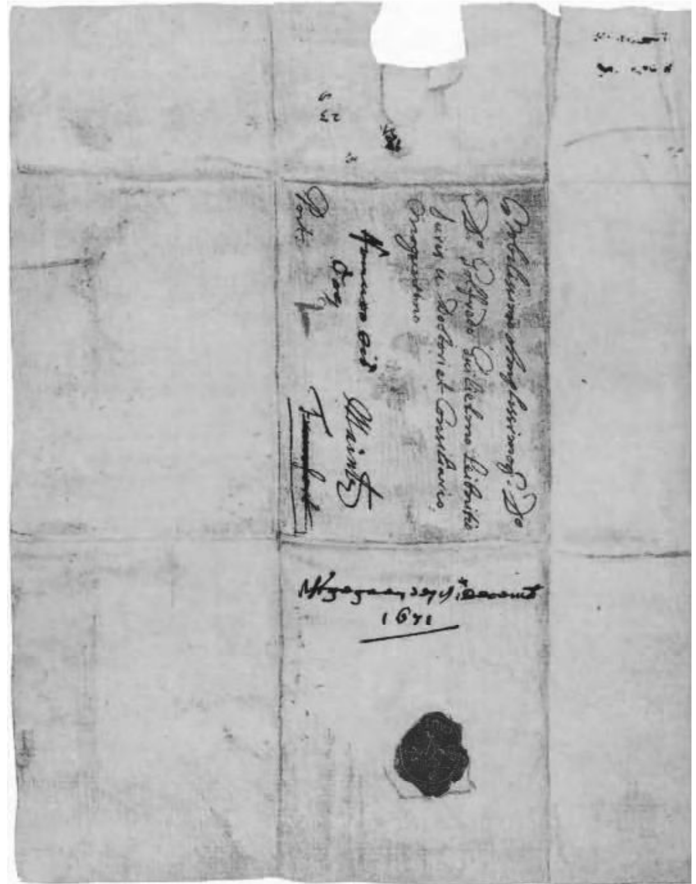
merely a foundation course for those intending to become clergymen, doctors or lawyers.

Indeed, at first there was no indication that Spinoza would become a scholar. Less than twenty years before his invitation to Heidelberg he was dealing in Mediterranean fruits. After attending the yeshiva run by the religious society Ets Haim in Amsterdam, he ran the firm Bento y Gabriël de Spinoza with his brother. But in 1656, when he was twenty-three, he was banned, and all his links with the Sephardic community in his home-town were thereby cut. Unlike many other outcasts – it was by no means exceptional to be (temporarily) banned from the synagogue – Spinoza accepted the break as irreversible, and started looking for a new way of life. He dropped the name Baruch in favour of Benedict, probably attended lectures for a time at Leiden University, and found a new source of income. He became a lens grinder.

Why the rabbis of Amsterdam no longer wanted the young Baruch in their congregation is unknown. Probably they could no longer put up with his impertinent questions about *Tenach* (what Christians call the Old Testament). Probably in the mid-1650s Spinoza had already written the nucleus of what was to appear anonymously in 1670 as his *Tractatus theologico-politicus.* However that may be, in 1656 Spinoza is literally and metaphorically out on the street. But he finds a new home with Franciscus van den Enden, a one-time Jesuit from Antwerp who had established a Latin school in the heart of the city, right behind the Dam, among dozens of bookshops. There the sons of the city's patriciate were initiated into the classics, and there Descartes was read. This interest in Descartes in Amsterdam in the middle of the seventeenth century is not in itself remarkable. Descartes had lived for twenty years in the Netherlands, he had published his most important works in Amsterdam and Leiden and acquired his first serious following in Dutch universities; and that *was* remarkable.

As we have said, the universities of Europe in the early modern period were not exactly hotbeds of philosophical innovation. In Oxford and Cambridge as well as Paris, not to mention the southern universities, Aristotle was read right up to the eighteenth century as if time had stood still. Though academic Aristotelianism was not – as was believed for a long time – a medieval anachronism, but rather the result of a sixteenth-century Aristotle 'revival', it hardly encouraged intellectual acceptance of the one intellectual challenge that fascinated the progressive minds of the seventeenth century: the so-called 'mechanisation of the world picture'. Descartes' ideas were, however, largely based on this very mechanisation, so that in the middle of the seventeenth century Cartesianism, which had provided the sciences with an entirely new foundation, was considered to be the 'modern' philosophy. There were, however, deep divisions about the desirability of this new philosophy. Many theologians in particular were far from enthusiastic.

Yet around 1650, the year in which Descartes succumbed in Stockholm to the exhausting regime of Queen Christina's court and died, there was in the Dutch Republic an extensive academic network of theologians, physicists and philosophers who were very attracted to Cartesianism. The regents who served on the boards of the universities listened courteously to the orthodox Calvinists' opposition to Cartesian metaphysics and numerous



other aspects of Descartes' legacy, but no action was taken. If a ban was imposed, or if the Cartesian professors were maybe advised to keep a low profile, such measures were usually ignored. It was through the Cartesian influence on higher education in the Republic that philosophy developed as it did, into an autonomous discipline. It also laid the foundation in the second half of the seventeenth century for the crucial part to be played by Leiden University in disseminating Newtonianism in the first half of the eighteenth century. But that is another story.

In fact, the Dutch regent patriciate turned non-intervention in politics into a fine art. Even books that were proscribed, such as those by Hobbes and the Socinians, and finally Spinoza's, remained available on the open market, to the chagrin of the orthodox calvinists, not surprisingly, and to the amazement of several foreign visitors to the Netherlands, who could not believe their eyes, unaccustomed as they were to this kind of government indifference. It was also quite clear to foreigners that the Republic was in no way ill-served by this deliberate indifference to the religious or philosophical views of its subjects. The Republican faction in the Netherlands of the time, to which Spinoza also belonged, defiantly formulated the advantages of this indifference: the success of the Republic depended on trade, and the trader selling or purchasing should not have to wonder whether his supplier or

Letter from Spinoza to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, written in The Hague on 9 November 1671 (facsimile: original in the Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover).

customer was a Calvinist, Lutheran, Catholic or Turk. Just so long as he supplied or paid. This, combined with the essentially theological Erasmian tradition of tolerance, provided such a cast-iron battery of arguments in favour of mutual tolerance that it survives honourably to this day in the Netherlands.

What is more, if the government really was minded to take firm action, the extensive decentralisation of public authorities severely limited the possibilities of implementing any more restrictive policy. There has never been a Versailles in the Netherlands. The provinces and the large cities in those provinces simply refused to give up their autonomy. Just as they had refused to yield to the Spanish Habsburgs and the Roman popes, so now they positively declined to bend the knee to the States-General in The Hague or the doctrinal authority of the synods of the Reformed Church. It cannot be overemphasised that in the Netherlands it was not just the university government but all public administration that was in the hands of the regents; and they were descended from families that had made their fortunes in commerce.

It was relatively easy for a young Jewish exile, such as Spinoza in the 1650s, in every way a marginal figure, to flourish on the fringes offered by the Republic to outsiders. He could easily acquire books by Descartes, and numerous commentaries on them by the latest Cartesian professors at

Leiden and Utrecht. There was nothing to stop him discussing recent developments in philosophy and science with his new friends. In this climate, where the diehard right wing of the Dutch Reformed Church was steadily losing its hold on public opinion, where the field seemed to be open to a staggering diversity of religious and philosophical societies, where the most exotic books were published and read, in this climate Spinoza must have been in his element. He made friends with liberal Mennonites who had broken away from all church doctrine, entering in complete freedom into debates on the Bible, on God and man, on good and evil, without the services of any minister. Descartes' call to use your own judgement rather than relying on tradition found a ready hearing in these circles. Away with preconceived ideas! For if by using reason you can arrive at the course of the planets, why should you not then be able rationally to debate the necessity of baptism or the authenticity of the books of the Bible? Our reason is after all God-given? When all is said and done, is reason not actually the divine *in* us?

Franciscus van den Enden and his friends went even further. Was Descartes' rationalism itself actually all that rationalistic? Why was Descartes so cautious where theology was involved? And why had Descartes never formulated a political philosophy? Precisely what Van den Enden taught his pupils we do not know. But in the early 1660s dangerous rumours were already circulating in Amsterdam. Van den Enden was said to lead a circle of disaffected Cartesians, of 'naturalists', of *atheists.* Van den Enden himself came to a sorry end. In 1670 he closed his school, reappearing soon after in Paris where he became closely involved with a notorious plot against Louis XIV. But he was betrayed, and in 1674 he was hanged in the Place de la Bastille.

Spinoza was more circumspect. There may have been considerable freedom in the Netherlands, but Spinoza realised that even in the Netherlands there were limits to tolerance. He withdrew to smaller towns like Rijnsburg and Voorburg. In 1663 he published a brilliant – geometrically arranged – *Principia Cartesianae Philosophiae,* in which he also warily indicated that he himself was not a fully committed Cartesian. But how he proposed to 'improve' on Descartes remained a mystery. When in 1669 his friend Adriaan Koerbagh perished in the Amsterdam gaol after the first impression of his highly Spinozistic *A Light Shining in Dark Places* (Een ligt schijnende in de duystere plaatsen, 1668) had been impounded, Spinoza became even more cautious. His *Tractatus theologico-politicus* appeared anonymously the following year. Not that that made much difference, since everyone knew immediately who the author was. And the book was butchered. Although the critics all agreed that they were up against an exceptionally gifted opponent, all the theological factions – the Calvinists, Arminians, the Cartesians and even the universally despised Socinians – took fright at Spinoza's thinly disguised atheism. For that, in their view, was what Spinozism was all about. Spinoza, after all, had maintained that the powers of nature were the same as God's, and that real miracles did not exist, that the prophets in the Bible were simply endowed with lively imaginations, that Moses could not possibly have written the first five books of the Old Testament, that theology and philosophy were two entirely different disciplines and that only philosophy was capable of formulating truths, so that philosophers must be allowed

freedom of thought, that democracy was the most natural form of government, and a whole lot more. It was all equally appalling, but what else could you expect from an atheist?

Spinoza was deeply hurt. He decided to keep his masterpiece, the *Ethics,* under wraps. He was about to publish it in 1675, having moved in the meantime to The Hague, but had second thoughts at the last moment. Not until two years later, just after his death, was it published by his friends as part of the so-called *Opera Posthuma.* It does then indeed become apparent that he identifies God with nature, that he attempts to interpret man as a perfectly natural being, that he believes that nature is governed by an absolute determinism, but that this need not lead to fatalism, because knowledge of the causal mechanism by which everything is made what it is, turns passive feelings into active and ultimately leads to what he calls 'amor intellectualis Dei'. This provoked further torrents of refutation. Until well into the eighteenth century he was attacked as the most dangerous atheist of his day, but he was also read – in France, for instance, by the radical wing of the Enlightenment and by the authors and copyists of the clandestine manuscript circuit. Later he was reinstated by the trend-setters of German Idealism, after which he gained his established place in the pantheon of western philosophy.

At this point emerges the myth of the isolated genius, the man rising above his time and place. Nor is that myth entirely absurd. Myths seldom are. Spinoza was certainly isolated, inasmuch as he proclaimed utterly revolutionary ideas. Moreover, anyone who writes such an *Ethics* as Spinoza wrote, cannot avoid shutting himself up for years in his study. The writing of such a book demands peace and quiet. But this should not eclipse the fact that Spinoza did indeed find that peace and quiet in the Netherlands. We have already seen that Spinoza as a Dutch philosopher was a remarkable phenomenon of international stature, even allowing for the fact that Dutch universities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made an outstanding contribution to the history of early modern philosophy.

Yet from a historical perspective, Spinoza's uniqueness must be accounted for in other ways: in his relationship to other – mainly older – philosophers who were also of the opinion that freedom in a prescribed universe

Reconstruction of Spinoza's library in Rijnsburg (Photo by Theo van der Werf).

consists in an understanding of the principles of that universal determinism. Isaiah Berlin once remarked (in *Four Essays on Liberty,* 1969) that such a concept of freedom *'seems to arise when the external world has proved exceptionally arid, cruel, or unjust (...). In a world where man seeking happiness or justice or freedom (in whatever sense) can do little, because he finds too many avenues of action blocked to him, the temptation to withdraw into himself may become irresistible. It may have been so in Greece, where the Stoic ideal cannot be wholly unconnected with the fall of the independent democracies before centralised Macedonian autocracy. It was so in Rome, for analogous reasons, after the end of the Republic.'*

The unique quality of Spinoza's ideas seems to be just this, that he was a 'Stoic' who did not reject the world around him, but embraced it as the inescapable product of the necessity that is the universe.

In the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* he said in so many words that he reckoned himself fortunate in living at a time and in a country where freedom was also nurtured by the authorities:

'Take the city of Amsterdam, which enjoys the fruits of this freedom, to its own considerable prosperity and the admiration of the world. In this flourishing state, a city of the highest renown, men of every race and sect live in complete harmony; and before entrusting their property to some person they will want to know no more than this, whether he is rich or poor and whether he has been honest or dishonest in his dealings. As for religion or sect, that is of no account, because such considerations are regarded as irrelevant in a court of law; and no sect whatsoever is so hated that its adherents – provided that they injure no one, render to each what is his own, and live upright lives – are denied the protection of the civil authorities.'

One of the most important propositions in the *Ethics* – it is the 29th in the first book – is this: 'In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.'

You do not need to be a Spinozist to see how the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic at the very least made Spinoza possible. The Republic did that by giving space to outsiders, to fringe figures, to minorities. And you need not go looking for the relevance of the past in order to find it.

WIEP VAN BUNGE
Translated by Peter King.

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THE INTERNATIONAL SPINOZA SOCIETY IN THE NETHERLANDS

When the house in Rijnsburg in which Spinoza had lived for a number of years was for sale in 1896, the *Vereniging Het Spinozahuis* was founded for the purpose of buying and establishing it as a Spinoza Museum. At present it houses, among many other things, the collection of books Spinoza possessed at the time of his death. One of the main objectives of the Society – in addition to managing the museum and keeping the building in good repair – is the advancement of the study of Spinoza's works. This is primarily done by means of organising meetings, publishing scholarly papers in the series *Mededelingen* and the distribution of a Newsletter, containing information about congresses, symposia, Spinoza-research and recent publications. The Society also has a Library and Reading room in *Domus Spinozana* in The Hague, the house in which Spinoza died in 1677.

For further information, please write to:
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