

FROM RADICAL MATERIALIST TO IDEALIST: THE HISTORY OF SPINOZISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

Henri Krop, *Spinoza, een paradoxale icoon van Nederland* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2014), ISBN: 978 90 351 38711, 821 pp.

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Henri Krop, the author of this impressive monograph, declares that he himself is 'not a Spinozist'. Consequentially, anyone looking for an essentialist interpretation of Spinoza's work should look elsewhere. Written in a contextualist manner, Krop's work is a history of the way in which very different Dutch thinkers interpreted Spinoza's work in the context of the intellectual climate of their own time. Thus, the almost 800 pages of this book offer a thorough reception history as well as an insightful exploration of the intellectual depth of Spinoza's body of thought itself. Due to its vast subject matter the focus is, understandably, solely on the impact of Spinoza on the Netherlands. The work is also a history of ideas in the classical sense of the word. The author pays some attention to socio-economic and -cultural developments, but philosophy and theology are its main concerns.

Krop discerns four different periods in the history of Dutch Spinozism. In each of these distinctly different aspects of Spinoza's thought emerged. The first period starts with the publication of the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* in 1670 and ends in 1720. The stormy reception of Spinoza's views is described in the light of the raging debates between scholastics, Cartesians, orthodox Protestants and spiritualists. Krop notices that even between alleged Spinozists convictions differed widely. Moreover, most of the outrage was directed at the *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* and the first chapters of Spinoza's *Ethics* - in which he elaborated on his monism. The rest of the *Ethics* and his political views were largely neglected by his opponents. In light of the increased interest in the Dutch Radical Enlightenment among scholars of history and philosophy, these chapters might be the most relevant to an international audience. Krop's cautious account is a refreshing addition to more sensationalist versions provided by scholars such as Jonathan Israel and Steven Nadler.

The second period ends in 1780. This might be the only period in which Spinoza was perceived as an oddity, as part of the stormy seventeenth-century debates which by this time the Dutch tried so hard to leave behind. The author argues, as Wiep van Bunge has done, that Newton's less provocative empiricism probably rendered Spinoza's metaphysics less attractive than it had seemed before. However, Krop shows that at the Dutch universities, Spinozist arguments continued to play an important role in the polemics between legal scholars and theologians. Outside the universities Spinoza remained part of the reading habits of Dutch intellectuals as well.

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His image was largely negative though, as Spinoza's refusal to grant man any form of agency made them portray him as a fatalist.

In the third period, 1780 - 1940, a very different image of Spinoza emerged. Both philosophers and theologians severed Spinoza from his own metaphysics and turned the presumed radical materialist into an idealist. Instead of the cause of the cold rationality of the enlightenment, he became the antidote. Even artists found solace in this 'sacral' view of nature. Not his monism but his *Ethics* took the main-stage. The popularity of this image peaked between 1845 and 1885, (the golden years), and remained important until World War II (the silver years). Krop's exploration of the influence of Kantian rationalism and German idealism on this new image is substantial and provides fascinating insights for anyone interested in the changing intellectual climate of northern Europe in the nineteenth century.

The fourth period starts after World War II and is characterized by the breakdown of Christianity, the decline of theology as a major force in Dutch intellectual life and the establishment of a largely academic Spinozism from the 1970s onwards. The last chapter, about the relevance of Spinoza for the world of today, is also the most personal one. The shift in tone of voice – from that of a confident expert to a more modest spectator – feels just about right, as the chapter is foremost an encouragement for the reader to start his or her own conversation with Spinoza's work.

The richness and intellectual depth of Krop's examination deserves high praise. His grasp of the material and impressive knowledge of western philosophy in general is noticeable in the way meta-historical and contextual asides are woven into the book. The absence of long introductory sections gives the story a steady pace. However, this, together with his refusal to provide a brief analysis of Spinoza's work itself, makes it at times a demanding read. On the whole, these are minor complaints. The book provides a compelling argument for the ongoing impact of Spinoza's work in the Netherlands. Especially its close connection with the Reformed tradition, both negative and positive, is most remarkable. Hopefully, an English translation will follow soon.