BEKKER AND SPINOZA

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In the controversy that arose in 1692 over Balthasar Bekker’s treatment of the temporal activities of spirits in his book The World Bewitched, a number of Bekker’s opponents, most notably the Amsterdam Reformed minister Jacobus Koelman, accused Bekker of advocating Spinozism. According to Koelman, among the many things wrong with Bekker’s book was that his “new ideas expressed in The World Bewitched have a lot in common with atheists, Sadducees, Epicureans, Libertines, and other Scripture despisers, and especially with Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, Adrian Koerbach, David Joris, and the like.”

That this was no idle criticism has been shown by Wietse van Bunge in an important article in The British Journal for the History of Philosophy in 1993, where he demonstrates how close Bekker’s biblical hermeneutics were to those of Spinoza, especially in the way both used the so-called doctrine of accommodation. In addition to these exegetical similarities, the two men shared a similar position on the activities of spirits, although they argued their cases quite differently. But despite these similarities, which were quite rightly pointed out by Bekker’s opponents, the actual relationships between the ideas of Bekker and Spinoza on spirits and on biblical exegesis were complex, and in the end the differences between their positions may tell us more, at least about Bekker’s intellectual position, than the similarities.

Bekker’s public position on Spinoza’s ideas is well known. In his 1685 continuation of George Hornius’s ecclesiastical history, which Bekker wrote at the request of the Rotterdam bookseller Balthasar Boeckholt after Hornius’s death prematurely terminated the work at the year 1666, Bekker related a meeting that he had had with

1 Jacobus Koelman, Wêderlegging van Balthasar Bekker’s Betoverde Wereld: Het Eerste Deel... (Amsterdam, 1692), p. 118.
Spinoza in The Hague during which Spinoza had admitted to being the author of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In discussing Spinoza’s ideas, Bekker accused him of violating the Dutch Cartesian principle of the separation of religion from philosophy by making philosophy the “master of things of belief.” He called Spinoza’s philosophy “absurd,” and listed his chief “errors” as the ideas:

That there is no substance, that is, independent entity, outside God; and that creatures are but modes, that is ways [wijzen] of God’s existence. 2) That this one substance has two essential characteristics: extension and thought. And there are infinite others that we do not know. 3) That all depends on an infinite number of causes, following each other in an infinite order and in infinite ways. 4) That no thing or deed is in itself good or bad. 5) That the Holy Scripture was not originally from God and that the holy writers erred in much. 6) That miracles are caused by and can be explained by natural causes.

According to Koelman, Bekker was only using his criticism of Spinoza to provide cover for his own irreligious ideas. Koelman claimed that Bekker’s method of biblical interpretation, like Spinoza’s, functioned chiefly to hide heretical ideas behind elaborate language. It seems to me, however, that it is more productive to take Bekker’s criticisms of Spinoza seriously, especially in light of the fact that the two did have important ideas in common. In this regard it is interesting to note, especially in light of Bekker’s position on Cartesian dualism to be outlined below, that Bekker’s first two objections against Spinoza’s ideas focussed on Spinoza’s monism. That Bekker considered these two points as the primary areas of disagreement between himself and Spinoza might be indicated by his placement of them at the head of the list of errors. There seems to be little other reason that they should be listed first, as these ideas came from the *Ethics*, which was of course published after the *Tractatus*, from which other ideas on the list were taken. Furthermore, in a work of church history one might well have expected Bekker to list first Spinoza’s errors of biblical interpretation, but these come last in the list, perhaps because Bekker’s own exegetical position was not far different on some crucial points. Especially with regard to objection number five concerning Spinoza’s claim that the

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