Hendrik Wyermars


“From what precedes it will be evident that no convincing arguments can be given ... to prove the origin and end of this material earth, sun, moon, and so on. For we have shown that neither ancient nor modern philosophers succeeded here, and that the Holy Scripture (if well understood) does not teach this thing either. For these and many other reasons brought forward in the course of this book we conclude that the material world as well as the vast universe stands forever and ever. And it is exactly that what I resolved upon to prove.”

*Wyermars*, p. 144

Wyermars was an early-to-mid eighteenth-century quasi-Spinozist, as the last line of his book *De ingebeelde chaos* (Imagined Chaos) illustrates: *Quod erat demonstratum* (Q.E.D.). We owe Michiel Wielema a great debt of gratitude for his continued unearthing of the radical underground of Spinozists in the Dutch Republic. Wyermars went beyond Spinoza in constructing a philosophy that gave the initial impression of being more rationalistic, deterministic, and materialistic than that of the master himself, demonstrating the existence of a Rasphuis radicalism linking another of Wielema’s great men—Adriaan Koerbagh—to the high Enlightenment flight into Holland of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751).

The theme I have outlined above is removed from Wielema’s primary message concerning Wyermars. After doing a brilliant job bringing to light the myriad, often quite shady legal proceedings against Wyermars—materials highly valuable in their own right—Wielema concludes of the affair Wyermars: “His trial is one of the most tragic examples of the suppression of the freedom of speech and the press in the supposedly tolerant Dutch Republic” (p. 7). And so indeed it was this as well. A Spinozist and materialist Wyermars was. The main point of *De ingebeelde chaos* was to rationally prove that the world was eternal, without beginning and end, and that *creatio ex nihilo* was impossible. Of course, beginning from these points leads to heterodox and even heretical conclusions about God himself, but atheism was not Wyermars’s ‘cup of tea.’ Near the end of his book, after all the caviling against creationism was over, Wyermars offered some well known proofs for the existence of God—which did not include Descartes’s ontological proof.

Wyermars’s primary belief about God and his relationship to the world seems to have been taken from Middle Platonist and Neo-Platonist sources. All
existence ‘flowed’ from God, Wyermars proclaimed. But the nature that exists from God bore no relationship to God’s nature. From this Middle Platonist view Wyermars drew a criticism of Spinoza, whom he followed in much else. According to Wyermars, Spinoza did not adequately distinguish between God and nature. God’s existence was the foundation for the existence of the world in its aspects of thought and extension. But this was not creation (Wyermars also made use of one of Aquinas’s quinque viae proofs for God’s existence).

Wyermars criticized many past and present philosophical views that held the world not to be eternal. Ancient philosophers tended to see the world coming together from a chaotic mix of elements. On this point Wyermars criticized Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, and by implication, Empedocles. Only Aristotle and Pliny escape this barrage. Among the moderns Wyermars took on Dutch thinkers Cornelis Dubbel and Nicholas Hartsoeker, who like Wyermars, was an atomist influenced by Gassendi. But he had harsh words for Hartsoeker’s atomism too, because the latter claimed there was no empty space between atoms.

This brought up the problem of movement. Wyermars then picked out two philosophers, an ancient and a modern: Lucretius (100–55 BC) and Dirk Santvoort (1653–1712). Lucretius’s atomism was contradictory, Wyermars said, because the latter claimed the atoms were moved by their weight but he gave them no defined size. In the end Wyermars claimed Lucretius “knew nothing about the world” (p. 35).

Santvoort’s problem was that he attempted the ancient ingebeelde chaos approach by seeing the earth begin with an interlacing air and water. But Santvoort could not explain if this mixing was accidental, a priori from the nature of extension, or a posteriori as perceived by people. In any event, the movement of all of Santvoort’s ‘little particles’ of air and water was toward the center, governed by the qualities of hot and cold. Heat was the attracting force, and cold the dispersing force. To humans, the attraction inward seems to make bodies eternal, but if cold caused one to be cast outside the inward movement it seemed to people that it no longer existed (pp. 77–78). Wyermars said Santvoort did not explain how the hot/cold mechanism worked, and so he was “refuted on the grounds of his own claims” (p. 102) and as we saw with Lucretius, “no one is more compellingly refuted than with his own words” (p. 103).

Very few writers have defended the eternity of the world. The best argument, even though weak, is what Wyermars calls Spinoza’s “Pre-adamite” theory, which he does not explain. And in any case Wyermars was no simple Spinozist: we have seen his critique of Spinoza’s pantheism. Wielema writes of Wyermars’s goal: “Obviously, the propagation of Spinoza’s teaching is not his aim” (p. 25). Wyermars was a radical attempting to construct his own naturalis-