


When I was first hired by the Institute for Christian Studies I was soon confronted with one of many small wonders. A philosopher’s interest in the history of philosophy is not the same as the interest of an historian of thought and its culture. I understand the difference as one of orientation rather than field. The historian of thought and its culture is primarily interested in sifting through a philosopher’s claims and arguments with a view to their capacity simultaneously to illumine and be illumined by the cultural and personal environment in which the philosopher lived. The philosopher, by contrast, is much more interested in the claims and arguments “for their own sake.” I mean by the last phrase that she is interested in seeing how such claims and arguments, when translated into her own philosophical idiom, can add to the ongoing philosophical conversation in which she participates. Indeed, the philosophical reader is interested in finding claims and arguments that illumine the world he inhabits, even if, or better in spite of the fact that, such historical claims and arguments are sodden with the wet weight of long past culture and experience.

My training, to that point, had been as an historian of thought and its culture. Vollenhoven offered me a way into the history of philosophy as a properly philosophical field of investigation. He has been with me as guide and as riddle ever since.

Consequently, I am very grateful for the appearance of these volumes and the effort they represent to get Vollenhoven’s problem-historical materials back into print, and to provide both English translations of some of those materials and a more extensive English-language introduction to his historiography than has been available heretofore. I feel obliged, however, to admit an obvious conflict of interest as reviewer, as perusal of the list of translators of one of the volumes will make clear. Nevertheless, I will persevere as is only to be expected of anyone formed to TULIP Calvinism. I begin with a few opening remarks about each of the volumes under review followed by some observations about the historiographical labors these volumes mediate.

We begin with Kornelis A. Bril’s introduction to and exploration of Vollenhoven’s problem-historical method. This little volume represents an English translation of a piece previously published in Dutch. It provides the reader a very basic introduction to Vollenhoven’s historiography of the history of philosophy. It begins by sketching out a narrative of modern Western philosophy that associates Vollenhoven with other, more prominent historiographers of thought. It then differentiates Vollenhoven’s project from these other historiographies, and articulates the diachronic and synchronic coordinates that Vollenhoven used to graph the wide variety of philosophical conceptions he encountered in the history he made his own. In the process it articulates what goes into such graphing and how it relates to Vollenhoven’s own constructive work as Christian philosopher, occasionally with the aid of cartoon-like graphics. The presentation is designed to be as accessible as possible so as to be able to speak to Christian students just beginning a university-level study of philosophy and its history, or perhaps busy academics who want some exposure to this distinctive approach to the history of philosophy but who are not yet sure that they have the
time or calling to wrestle through the highly condensed prose of Vollenhoven’s own historiographical writings.

We next pass on to the Dutch and English volumes of a collection of Vollenhoven’s own historiographical writings. They contain (1) his meditation on the relationship between conservative and progressive tendencies in the history of philosophy, (2) his short summary of the history of Western philosophy, (3) his account of the genesis and fruitfulness of his historiographical approach to the history of philosophy, and finally (4) a student reportatio of his lecture on gnosticism of 5 July 1965. This is a well-chosen selection of material, though one wonders a little why the last student-mediated piece was preferred to one that fell directly from Vollenhoven’s pen.

The first two pieces present the reader with the narrative potential of the method, both as to a specific problematic within the history of Western philosophy (its conservative and progressive tendencies) and as to that history when it is itself viewed as a narratable unity. The third and fourth piece provide the reader a look at the method’s cartographic potential, i.e., its capacity to capture and arrange graphically philosophical conceptions in terms of various families of thought as they exist through time and within its ever changing cultural eras. While the third piece tries to do this via a survey of the emergence of the grid of basic types in the first few eras or time-streams of the history of Western philosophy, the fourth piece focuses upon one type in its moment of emergence as a culturally dominant phenomenon at the dawn, so to speak, of Late Antiquity, a myth-fertile family of conceptions that is arguably once again prominent in the post-Heideggerian (and Nietzschean) world of ‘French’ postmodernity.

I should say a couple of words about the English version of this collection. The translations are more rough-and-ready than would be the products of professional translators. This is occasionally to be seen in the translations themselves. There are certainly a number of places in my own contributions in which Vollenhoven’s meaning could have been more effectively expressed. On the whole, however, (and here is where my conflict of interest becomes comical) I would defend the translations as adequate in spite of room for improvement. There is however more to these texts challenging the reader’s comprehension than the trauma inherent in their transposition from one language into another. The Dutch editor of the volume has been commendably alert to the need for further explication at many points. It is unfortunate, however, that these informative and academically valuable editorial interventions were not looked over by a native English speaker before finding their way into print in the English volume. The results are sometimes jarring. We find, to give but two egregious and frequently occurring examples, that Vollenhoven ‘learned’ rather than ‘taught’ his students one conception or another, or that a given conception was ‘orientated on’ rather than ‘orient(ed) toward’ some state of affairs or other. These things happen when moving from a first to a second language, no matter how good one’s facility with the second language. Nevertheless, this volume whether in its Dutch or English version forms a valuable part of a trilogy of pieces that together present Vollenhoven’s problem-historical method as he himself practiced it. In the present volume we see above all the narrative potential inherent within Vollenhovian cartography. The other works of the trilogy are (1) a reworking of Vollenhoven’s Schematische Kaarten published in 2000 which underlines Vollenhoven’s own constantly tended cartographic identifications, and (2) the fourth volume to be reviewed in the present context.

This last volume republishes the many philosophical articles Vollenhoven had contributed to the Oosthoeks Encyclopedie. The articles are arranged in alphabetical order beginning with the Norwegian philosopher Anathon Aall and ending with the Reformation era theologian Ulrich Zwingli. Many of the articles are published here in two redactions, the first being what actually appeared in the Oosthoeks Encyclopedie