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Spinoza

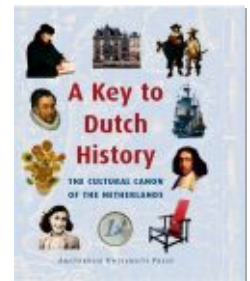
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Slings, Hubert and Frits van Oostrom.

A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands.

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1632 - 1677

## Spinoza

In search of truth

Spinoza is the most famous philosopher of the Netherlands: he belongs to a small group of philosophers who changed the course of western thinking.

Benedictus de Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632 as Baruch d’Espinoza, the son of Jewish parents who had fled from Portugal. He died in The Hague in 1677 of a lung disease. Spinoza lived a quite frugal life and to earn his keep he ground lenses for glasses and microscopes. His illness was probably aggravated by the dust he inhaled in this work.

Spinoza’s nickname was “Bento”, which means the same in Portuguese as Baruch in Hebrew and Benedictus in Latin: “the blessed”. Spinoza learned Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and Hebrew and later wrote in Latin. After his religious training, in 1656 he came into conflict with the Amsterdam Jewish community. Probably not because he was critical of orthodox beliefs, but rather because he

did not want to conform outwardly to the strict orthodox rules and requirements.

Although in comparison with surrounding countries the Republic was tolerant and dealt patiently with criticism, Spinoza still had to be careful. He published a lot of his works under a pseudonym – or not at all. His major work, the *Ethica*, was only published after his death.

In the “disaster year” of 1672, the atmosphere became increasingly turbulent and the De Witt brothers were lynched by an Orangist mob without any interference from the authorities. This shocked Spinoza so deeply that he wanted to take a placard to the spot bearing the text *ultimi barbarorum* (‘you are the greatest of all barbarians’). His landlord and friend stopped him and in so doing probably saved his life.

In his book *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza gave the initial impetus to a free-thinking interpretation of the Bible.

In the *Tractatus politicus* he spoke up for democracy and pointed out the enormous importance of freedom of expression.

The *Ethica* (in full the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*), Spinoza's masterpiece, was meant to teach people how they could lessen their suffering. This was not philosophy for its own sake, because the book had a practical objective: to teach people to see that God is part of Creation, that everything that exists is a manifestation of God – including human beings. In order to come to this clear realisation it was of the utmost importance to be independent and free of intense

passions. Spinoza lived his beliefs: his arguments were always presented calmly, were well-considered and reasonable. He did not ever allow himself to be provoked.

The *Ethica* appears to be structured like a geometric system. Spinoza uses definitions, axioms and propositions: in this way he tries to approach matters objectively despite the turbulence of the times. Throughout history many readers have complained that this makes the book very difficult to read. But then Spinoza has the last word, because the final sentence of the *Ethica* says: "All noble things are as difficult as they are rare."

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## Sub-topics

### Primary education sector

The Disaster Year of 1672: desperate (the leaders), lost to reason (the people), unredeemable (the country)  
Jewish culture (in Amsterdam and elsewhere)  
Freedom of worship and speech  
Immigration and assimilation

### Secondary education sector

Western philosophy  
Religion and morals  
Different seventeenth-century theories on democracy:  
Hobbes and Spinoza

### Past and Present

Einstein: "I believe in Spinoza's God"  
Tolerance, now and then  
Flowers, teddy bears and letters at the scenes  
of disasters examined as contemporary  
*ultimi barbarorum* placards

### In the Treasure Chest

Model of old microscope/telescope/glasses

## References

### Places to Go

Rijnsburg: Spinozahuis  
The Hague: Spinozahuis  
A synagogue (in Amsterdam or elsewhere)

### Books for young people

Henk van Kerkwijk, *Het rampjaar* (10+)  
Jostein Gaardner, *De wereld van Sofie* (14+)

### Background literature

Jonathan Israel, *Radicale Verlichting: Hoe radicale Nederlandse denkers het gezicht van onze cultuur voorgoed veranderden*, Franeker 2005

### Websites

[www.despinoza.nl](http://www.despinoza.nl)