



Christoph Lüthy, ***David Gorlaeus (1591-1612): An Enigmatic Figure in the History of Philosophy and Science*** (History of Science and Scholarship in the Netherlands 13; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, 225 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 438 1).

The title of this volume, written by the Nijmegen historian of philosophy and science, Lüthy, rightly calls David Gorlaeus an enigmatic figure. This is the first monograph devoted to this early seventeenth-century *Wunderkind* in philosophy, who died at the early age of 21. Until the 1650s he was regarded as one of the most important critics of Aristotle. In the *Epistola ad curatores* (1648) the Leiden philosopher Heereboord counted him, along with Dante, Petrarch, Agricola, Erasmus, Luther, Patrizzi, Bacon and Descartes, as one of the great *novatores* of philosophy and culture. Due to his atomism his name remained widely known both to historians of science and the general public. Dijksterhuis depicted him as a precursor of Galileo and other modern historians even transformed him into an empirical scientist. In 1989 the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen used some of the philosopher's texts in the *libretto* of his opera *De materia*. Three years earlier, in 1986, his 1651 *Idea physicae* had been published in a popular edition with Dutch and Frisian translations. Yet until now Gorlaeus's life and ideas have remained basically unknown because both his elaborate *Exercitationes philosophicae* (1620) and his *Idea physicae* are extremely rare and copies were unavailable in Dutch public libraries. (However since 1986 the libraries of both Leiden and Leeuwarden have acquired copies of the former.) As a result of this he had not found a secure place in the historiography of Dutch philosophy. In 1959 Sassen in his *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte in Nederland* characterised him as a 'lonely figure'. For more than a century the divergent evaluations of his ideas made a study of this figure a desideratum.

David Gorlaeus begins with an outline of Gorlaeus' two posthumous works, written between 1610 and 1612, because 'they contain a reference to Galileo's astronomical discoveries announced in the *Sidereus nuncius*' (27). The first riddle the *Exercitationes philosophicae* presents is why it was published at all and then in such a negligent way. The last chapter on the soul remained unfinished and there is no preface other than a few lines warning 'the benevolent reader of the usual typographical carelessness'. According to Lüthy the answer might well be the link between Gorlaeus and Arminianism, for example the inclusion of 'the treatment of God's nature and attributes within the discipline of philosophy' (37). The publication of the *Idea physicae* four decades after the

author's death, is also curious. A letter 'about the motion of the earth' written by a Copernican was appended to the book although Gorlaeus was not an adherent of heliocentrism. After his attempt to solve these riddles, Lüthy deals with Gorlaeus's conception of philosophy and his atomism. Gorlaeus identifies (theoretical) philosophy with ontology, i.e. the science of being. Its parts are theology, *angelographia* and physics, the last science dealing with 'unchanging beings'. Lüthy rightly points out the critique of Aristotelianism implied in these definitions and he underlines Gorlaeus's nominalism: Ockham's razor is invoked no fewer than 17 times in the *Exercitationes* and 5 times in the *Idea*. With its cutting edge he reduced the inventory of Aristotle's ontology, denying the reality of all non-individual beings, such as a heap of stones – the world, which is not one body, but a collection of bodies, – water and man. Gorlaeus's last example implied a Platonic dualism of man and was used by the leading Utrecht theologian Gisbertus Voetius in attacking Cartesianism. However, Gorlaeus also had a certain theological motivation in adopting this philosophical theory of man. Quoting the Bible, he observed that the unification of the soul with Christ implies that not man, but the individual soul is a substance (39). However, the third example is philosophically more interesting. By reducing 'water' to a mere heap of things, Gorlaeus denied the reality of the substantial forms – man, water, tree, cat etc. – that, according to scholastic philosophy, were the essence of the individuals belonging to a certain species. In this manner Gorlaeus, basing his argument on his metaphysics, advanced 'an essentially atomist conception of nature' (39). As Lüthy emphasises, the overruling reasons for adopting these notions were of a theological and metaphysical nature: in this sense he is not a forerunner of scientific atomism.

Lüthy continues with the biography. The Franeker teacher of philosophy Henricus de Veno (1574-1613) played an important part in Gorlaeus' education. Because of his influence on Gorlaeus, Lüthy describes the life of the professor of ethics and physics extensively. De Veno followed in the footsteps of contemporary German Protestant philosophers in their rejection of the doctrine of 'double truth' and their attempt to align philosophy and theology. Just like Gorlaeus, he regarded the Bible as containing the ultimate criterion of truth, even in physics, and was also interested in Italian naturalism. Moreover, Lüthy elaborates on the link with Arminianism already mentioned. About 1610 Gorlaeus went to Leiden where, on 23 April 1611, he enrolled at the theological faculty. During his student years the Arminian crisis went on and the closely related Vorstius affair was beginning to mark university life. In 1610 the States of Holland appointed Vorstius to the chair of Arminius. In the same year this German theologian republished his *Tractatus de Deo sive de natura et attributis Dei*, which apparently argued for a theological rationalism. Soon the Counter-Remonstrants linked Vorstius to Socinianism, the most decried heresy of the seventeenth century because of its denial of the Trinity. The king of England, James I, ordered this work to be burned in public and by supporting the cause of the Counter-Remonstrants he intervened actively in Dutch politics. The States finally had to give in and Vorstius never assumed his office. According to the Lüthy it is evident that

Vorstius's views expressed in the *Tractatus* closely resemble the position taken by Gorlaeus in the *Exercitationes*. They share the belief that 'the [philosophical] knowledge of *entia* can provide us with essential knowledge about God and thereby help us perfect our souls' (122).

In 1641 Voetius wrote of Gorlaeus that 'due the imprudence of his youth' he shared Vorstius' dualistic view of man by claiming that man is 'an accidental being'. Gorlaeus took up the defence of this 'heretical' view before embarking on his theological studies (99). Lüthy is convinced of the exactitude of these 'precious pieces of information'. However I doubt if the link between Gorlaeus and Vorstius was common knowledge in the 1640s, because if it were, it is hardly likely that Heereboord would have included Gorlaeus' metaphysics in his *Advice on the method of studying philosophy* (139). Moreover the idea that the philosopher is entitled to deal with the nature and attributes of God was not as rare in seventeenth-century Reformed philosophy as Lüthy suggests: it was also advocated by hard-line Calvinists such as Maccovius, Burgersdijk, appointed to Leiden after the 1619 purge, and Heereboord. Nevertheless these few comments do not diminish the significance of *David Gorlaeus*. According to *From Stevin to Spinoza*, Wiep van Bunge's outline of seventeenth-century Dutch philosophy, the authority of Aristotelianism at the Dutch universities had been questioned from the beginning, substantially facilitating the rapid breakthrough of Cartesianism. Lüthy elegantly shows that Gorlaeus was one of the early opponents of Aristotelianism.

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