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## ***Vide Spinozam*, or Burchard de Volder between Cartesianism and Heterodoxy**

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, I intervene in a long-standing debate over the alleged assumption and teaching of Spinozist ideas by the Dutch philosopher and scientist Burchard de Volder (1643–1709). I discuss De Volder's position with respect to three main topics (necessitarianism, substance monism, and biblical interpretation), as well as the use his student Jacob Wittich made of De Volder's ideas in Wittich's highly controversial *De natura Dei* (1711). Eventually, I argue that De Volder was certainly a sympathizer of Spinoza, accepted necessitarianism, and considered Spinoza as a reliable interpreter of Descartes in physics, even if he did not accept Spinoza's monist metaphysics, nor his biblical hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** Burchard de Volder; Cartesianism; Spinozism; necessitarianism; monism; biblical interpretation;

### **1. Introduction**

In this article, I discuss a vexed issue in the historiography of early modern philosophy and science: the alleged teaching of Spinoza's ideas by Burchard de Volder (1643–1709), professor of philosophy and mathematics at Leiden from 1670 to 1705. The question is of no little importance, as its solution could potentially shed new light on the dissemination of radical and Spinozist ideas at the highest level of academic culture in early modern times, since De Volder had been the mentor of figures such as Jacob Bernoulli, Bernard de Mandeville, Hermann Boerhaave, Bernard Nieuwentijt, and extended his network to Johannes Hudde, Philipp van Limborch, Johann Bernoulli, Christiaan Huygens, Leibniz, Robert Boyle, Jean Le Clerc, Pierre Bayle, and Isaac Newton. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, De Volder's ideas on metaphysics were labelled Spinozist, or as favouring Spinozism, by a number of authors, such as the Franeker Cartesian professor of philosophy and theology Ruardus Andala, Gottlieb Stolle, Johann Christian Hallmann (who interviewed De Volder in 1703), Johannes Regius, Pierre Poiret, Jacob Leydekker and Joachim Lange.<sup>1</sup> In 2001, Jonathan Israel placed De Volder amongst the protagonists of the Radical

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Strazzoni, *Burchard de Volder and the Age of the Scientific Revolution* (Dordrecht, 2019), 121–199.

Enlightenment, after the assessment of De Volder's positions given by Wim Klever in his article *Burchardus de Volder (1643–1709): A Crypto-Spinozist on a Leiden Cathedra* (1988). Klever argued that De Volder upheld the following Spinozist ideas: (1) epistemological naturalism, (2) necessitarianism, (3) soul-body parallelism and (4) substance monism.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, Paul Lodge criticized the evidence adduced by Klever regarding De Volder's crypto-Spinozism, arguing that “there is compelling evidence only for the first of these,”<sup>3</sup> namely (as Klever put it) the idea that “it is impossible to have a clear understanding of something and not to adhere to it.”<sup>4</sup> Still, the question remains open, as in more recent years attention to De Volder has increased and historians have brought to the fore new evidence on his thought.<sup>5</sup> It is thus time for a reassessment of De Volder's alleged Spinozism, which I will address by reconsidering the issues of necessitarianism (section 2), substance monism (section 3), the use of his ideas in Jacob Wittich's 1711 disputation *De natura Dei* (section 4), and De Volder's explicit use of Spinoza in physics, as well as his ideas on religion and biblical interpretation (section 5). Eventually, I argue that (1) De Volder used Spinoza as a clarifying source on Descartes in natural philosophy, (2) conceived thought and extension, like Spinoza, as infinite and numerically unique attributes, and (3) accepted a form of necessitarianism compatible with Spinoza's, which could entail a substance monism. (4) However, De Volder never accepted substance monism, because he never applied his theory of causality to divine agency. For this reason, De Volder's scattered Spinozist tenets were never unified in a thorough-going Spinozist philosophy.

## 2. Necessitarianism

Reconstructing De Volder's views in a systematic manner is not easy, as he never published comprehensive treatises. His extant printed works consist mostly of his academic disputations, such as his *De rerum naturalium principiis* (1674–1676), *De aëris gravitate* (1676–1678), *Contra atheos* (1680–1681), and a series of *Exercitationes* (1690–1693) refuting the *Censura philosophiae cartesianae* (1689) of Pierre-Daniel Huet. These texts all underwent publication as monographs not

<sup>2</sup> Wim Klever, “Burchardus de Volder (1643–1709): A Crypto-Spinozist on a Leiden Cathedra,” *Lias: Journal of Early Modern Intellectual Culture and its Sources* 15 (1988), 191–241; Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), 247–248, 310–311, 436–437, 439–440, 482–484.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Lodge, “Burchard de Volder: Crypto-Spinozist or Disenchanted Cartesian?,” in *Receptions of Descartes: Cartesianism and Anti-Cartesianism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Tad Schmaltz (London-New York, 2005): 128–145, there 131.

<sup>4</sup> Klever, “Burchardus de Volder,” (see above, n. 2), 196; cf. Lodge, “Burchard de Volder,” (see above, n. 3), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Wiesenfeldt, *Leerer Raum in Minervas Haus: Experimentelle Naturlehre an der Universität Leiden, 1675–1715* (Amsterdam, 2002); Tammy Nyden, “De Volder's Cartesian Physics and Experimental Pedagogy,” in *Cartesian Empiricisms*, ed. Mihnea Dobre and Tammy Nyden (Dordrecht, 2013): 227–249; Strazzoni, *Burchard de Volder* (see above, n. 1).

authorized by their author, who repeatedly claimed that they were only academic exercises.<sup>6</sup> Such distancing can be explained by considering the forced departure of Abraham Heidanus from his academic position as professor of theology in 1676. This took place after the publication of a defence of Cartesian and Cocceian positions in philosophy and theology, entitled *Consideratien over eenige saecken onlanghs voorgevallen in de Universiteyt binnen Leyden* (1676). In this book, De Volder and the Cartesian theologian Christoph Wittich commented upon a series of propositions (some of which could be traced back to Lodewijk Meijer), which had been condemned by academic authorities after the disorder that took place at the University in 1674–1675. However, since the name of Heidanus (who wrote the introduction) alone appeared in the front matter, he was the only one who was forced to resign.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the number of disputations presided over by De Volder fell drastically, and he did not resume any new series of disputations until his *Contra atheos* in 1680. The contents of the latter work are particularly illuminating about his ‘radical’ ideas, especially his determinist theory of causality. Such a theory, and its closeness to Spinozism, may partially explain why De Volder refused to have his ideas published in monograph form.

The context of the appearance of his *Contra atheos* raises some doubt about the actual aim of these disputations. Since the 1670s, Spinoza had been overtly labelled an atheist. In the Netherlands, it was Lambertus van Velthuysen who, soon after the appearance of Spinoza’s *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), wrote that Spinoza recognized the existence of God, but as he envisaged a notion of God unsuited to “move men to reverence by his divinity, since he himself is subject to fate,” Spinoza, according to Van Veltuysen, could be seen as “teaching sheer atheism with furtive and disguised arguments.”<sup>8</sup> De Volder, by giving to his disputations the title *Contra atheos* thus entered into the midst of a debate on Spinoza’s atheism. Accordingly, one might even re-title his collection of disputations ‘Contra Spinozam’. The contents of the disputations, however, do not confirm this outlook. What we find in them, is an assessment of the existence of the self based on Augustine’s *Soliloquia* and two demonstrations of the existence of God paralleling those of Descartes; namely an a posteriori proof based on the objective content of the idea of God and an ontological or a priori proof. Significantly, however, the second proof is supported by a theory of causality entailing geometrical necessitarianism. According to De Volder’s argument, the idea of God entails that of His existence as one of His attributes, just as the idea of a triangle entails that of

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bayle, “Catalogue de livres nouveaux accompagné de quelques remarques,” *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (February 1686), 225–227; Henri Basnage de Beauval, “Extraits des diverses lettres,” *Histoire des ouvrages de sçavans* (May 1695), 421–430, there 421–422.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Christiaan Molhuysen, ed., *Bronnen tot de Geschiednis der Leidsche Universiteit 1574–1811*, 7 vols. (The Hague, 1913–1924), 3: 317–327. See Ester Bertrand, *Johannes Swartenhengst (1644–1711): a Dutch Cartesian in the Heat of Battle* (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh-Free University of Brussels, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, *The Letters*, intr. and trans. Samuel Shirley, Steven Barbone, Jacob Adler and Lee Rice (Indianapolis, 1995), 236.

three angles, and of a cause entails that of an effect (and vice-versa). Any differentiation between such attributes depends only on our ways of considering them:

The weakness of human understanding is such that it is not possible to apprehend and understand the nature of anything, and of all the things which are in it, by one single concept. [...] Thus, I contemplate the nature of a triangle with completely different concepts: either, indeed, as a figure provided with three sides, or [...] as a figure whose internal angles are equal to two straight ones. [...] Even if such [attributes] pertain to the thing in the same way, our mind is used to conceive one of these as the primary one, either because it comes first to the mind, or because it allows an easier deduction of the other [attributes]: [...] not because this [attribute] constitutes the nature of a thing in a way different from that [one], but because such is the order of our [...] knowledge of things. [...] Indeed, if we say [...] that different attributes are caused and produced by the nature of things, from which however they do not differ, why is not possible to say the same about existence, [...] in that case in which it is the attribute of the thing from which it necessarily flows? Why can't I conceive the one and the same [thing], both as the giver and as the receiver? Why can't I conceive the one and the same thing [...] with different concepts, which are said to constitute different attributes of the thing, in such a way that I conceive that one [thing] gives its being to the other one, and the other one receives [its being] from it, namely, one is the cause of the other?<sup>9</sup>

This account of causality was developed on the basis of the Scholastic idea of 'proximate cause' as it was formulated, amongst others, by Franco Burgersdijk (whose logic had been taught by De Volder at Leiden).<sup>10</sup> It was the only one accepted by De Volder in his works, who in any case refrained from considering its application to divine agency. De Volder, for instance, does not apply it to the a posteriori argument, and he does not consider the problem of the freedom of God in creating the world anywhere in his disputations. After his retirement, this account of causality was to be criticized harshly and repeatedly by Ruardus Andala – a foremost adversary of De Volder, as I will show in more detail in section 4, below. In his *Exercitationes academicae in philosophiam primam et naturalem* (1708), Andala attacked De Volder's idea of necessary causation as it is applied to the divine creation of the world. Since De Volder reduced any kind of causality to proximate causation and equated this to the geometrical relation between attributes, he ultimately ended up imposing necessity upon God's creation of the world in the same way Spinoza did.<sup>11</sup>

Given his determinist or geometrical idea of causation, it is not surprising that in the course of his life De Volder showed overt sympathy for a necessitarian *à la* Spinoza, namely Johannes

<sup>9</sup> Burchard de Volder, *Disputationes philosophicae omnes contra atheos* (Middelburg: Lateran, 1685), theses 66–68. Unless taken from a translated edition, all the quotations from primary sources are the author's translations. As to De Volder's argument for the existence of God, see theses 37–39.

<sup>10</sup> Franco Burgersdijk, *Institutionum logicarum libri duo* (Leiden: Commelin, 1626), 335; Jean Le Clerc, "Éloge de feu Mr. de Volder," *Bibliothèque choisie* 18 (1709), 346–354, there 352.

<sup>11</sup> Ruardus Andala, *Exercitationes academicae in philosophiam primam et naturalem* (Franeker: Bleck, 1708), 36–37.

Bredenburg. He did so on two distinct occasions, which require some digression. First, De Volder summarized the argument for universal determinism given by Bredenburg in his *Wiskunstige demonstratie, dat alle verstandelijke werking, noodzaakelijk is* (1684) in a letter to Leibniz of 18 October 1700.<sup>12</sup> After Leibniz's reply, according to which "Bredenburg's demonstration suffers from the common fallacy that the determination or infallibility of what will happen is confused with necessity,"<sup>13</sup> De Volder commented in the following way:

[T]he notions of cause and effect seem to incline very strongly toward necessity. Certainly, it seems that nothing happens without a cause, and every cause seems to produce its effect necessarily.<sup>14</sup>

Second, we find Bredenburg's name in Jacob Wittich's *Zeedig antwoord* (1723). This work was aimed at the attacks made by Johannes Alexander Roëll, son of the theologian Hermann Alexander, in his *Larva detracta Jacobo Wittichio* (1723). According to the correspondence between Wittich and Hermann Alexander Roëll published by Johannes Alexander in this book, Wittich's *De natura Dei* had been negatively judged by Roëll senior.<sup>15</sup> Afterwards, Wittich complained in his *Zeedig antwoord* that his correspondence had been misused, noting that De Volder once warned him to be careful in his correspondence, as the same thing had previously happened to Bredenburg.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, his correspondence with Van Limborch had been published and used against him by Van Limborch himself in 1686.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, we see that De Volder's positions on causality led to an absolute necessitarianism, and also his overt sympathies for Bredenburg cannot be ignored. But does this make him a Spinozist? In his *Ethica*, Spinoza adopted as the third axiom of the section *De Deo* the principle for which "from a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow."<sup>18</sup> As the second definition of the *De mente*, he stated

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Lodge, ed., *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence: With Selections from the Correspondence Between Leibniz and Johann Bernoulli* (New Haven, 2013), 191–192.

<sup>13</sup> Leibniz to De Volder, 31 December 1700, *ibid.*, 201.

<sup>14</sup> De Volder to Leibniz, 13 February 1701, *ibid.*, 205.

<sup>15</sup> Johannes Alexander Roëll, *Larva detracta Jacobo Wittichio [...] Jacobus Wittichius ontmaskert* (Utrecht: Vande Water, 1723), *Epistolae*, 24–25.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Wittich, *Zeedig antwoord op het lasterschrift tegen hem gemaakt door Johannes Alexander Röell* (Leiden: Dyckhuysen, 1723), 25–26.

<sup>17</sup> Philipp van Limborch, *Schriftelyke onderhandeling, tusschen den Heer Philippus van Limborg ende Johannes Bredenburg* (Rotterdam: Bos, 1686); cf. Wiep van Bunge, *Johannes Bredenburg (1643–1691). Een Rotterdamse collegiant in de ban van Spinoza* (Ph.D. diss., Erasmus University Rotterdam, 1990), 219.

<sup>18</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, *The Collected Works*, ed. Edwin M. Curley (Princeton, 1985), 1: 410.

that “I say that to the essence of any thing belongs that which, being given, the thing is [...] necessarily posited and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily [...] taken away.”<sup>19</sup> De Volder’s essentialist theory of causality, according to which once the caused is posed the effect is posed and vice-versa, and their mutual differentiation is only a *modum considerandi*, is certainly compatible with Spinoza’s. Likewise, his *Contra atheos* can be read as an attempt to defend a Cartesian metaphysics, to introduce a necessitarian view in philosophy, and – indirectly – to infer that necessitarianism does not imply atheism. As reported by Stolle and Hallman in their *Reisejournal*, indeed, De Volder opposed the idea that Spinoza was an atheist for the reason that he had a demonstration of the existence of God, thereby confirming his Spinozist sympathies, *contra* Van Velthuysen.<sup>20</sup> In any case, De Volder did not push his principles in a potentially dangerous philosophical discussion on divine causality, which would have logically entailed that created substances are differentiated from God only as His attributes. However, once his principles were applied to a discussion of the nature of God by Jacob Wittich, De Volder came to be regarded as a Spinozist. This accusation concerned not only his necessitarianism (attacked by Andala) but also his theory of substance and his overall philosophical approach, which I shall illustrate in the next sections.

### 3. Substance Monism

De Volder dealt with the idea of substance most clearly in his correspondence with Leibniz, developing ideas and principles he had set out in his previous disputations and exercises. At the top of De Volder’s agenda was the aim of finding an a priori argument for the activity of extended substance, namely an argument based on the idea of extended substance alone, as he found the idea of reverting to the causal action of God as universal mover (adopted by Descartes and Malebranche) to be “not worthy of a philosopher.”<sup>21</sup> De Volder formulated two criteria to acknowledge what is a substance. As reconstructed by Paul Lodge, these criteria are (1) conceptual simplicity, namely, one cannot remove anything from the idea of a substance without making the idea of it inconceivable, and (2) conceptual independency, namely, one can conceive a substance by itself or *per se*, without the idea of anything else.<sup>22</sup> This cost him an accusation of monism from Leibniz, who criticized the conceptual independency criterion, because according to this rule, God would be the only substance (*à la* Spinoza). Later, Johannes Regius resumed this argument in his *Cartesius versus Spinozismi*

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 447.

<sup>20</sup> Warsaw, Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, Cod. IV oct. 49, 589–590.

<sup>21</sup> Leibniz to De Volder, 19 November 1703, Lodge, *Correspondence* (see above, n. 12), 279.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Lodge, “The Debate over Extended Substance in Leibniz’s Correspondence with De Volder,” *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 15 (2001), 155–166.

*architectus* (1719), aimed at linking De Volder’s supposed monism to Descartes’s ideas.<sup>23</sup> De Volder, in turn, replied to Leibniz that one can think of matter and soul without considering the idea of their cause, because this cause is not natural, i.e., it is God – as stated in Descartes’s *Principia* (I.51–52).<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, De Volder maintained a substance monism as to the idea of matter or extension. This idea, indeed, does not involve any other concept (that is to say, it is conceptually independent), and it does not involve the idea of parts, which would pose a vacuum in it (namely, it is conceptually simple): so that extension is numerically one.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, in his *Exercitationes*, De Volder introduced a principle according to which the idea of a thing (*res*) does not include the idea of its negation. As he specifies, this is the case of the ideas of extension and thought: these are infinite because they do not involve any other idea but that of themselves. On the contrary, the idea of finite extension (which in fact is the idea of a mode and contravenes the two criteria mentioned above) “involves some negation of extension” – and the same applies to thought.<sup>26</sup> This principle recurs in the correspondence between Locke and Van Limborch. The latter acted in 1697–1698 as intermediary between Locke and Johannes Hudde (patron of De Volder) in a discussion on the possibility of a philosophical demonstration of the numerical uniqueness of God.<sup>27</sup> As reported in the letter of Van Limborch to Locke of 2/12 September 1698, De Volder had a separate talk with Van Limborch on the matter, in which he told him that he had already discussed the issue with Hudde, without however coming to a solution. Van Limborch reports that De Volder actually disagreed with Hudde’s ‘absolute dualism’ between extension and thought, according to which “if we suppose that thought existing of itself [*per se*] is given, and further, matter or extension, neither can have any knowledge of the other.” According to De Volder, this is untenable, for “since thought exists of itself [*per se*] and is sufficient to itself, it is also infinite; and accordingly [...] [thought] necessarily knows that extension exists.”<sup>28</sup> Thus far, extension and thought are both infinite and numerically unique, according to De Volder, and the knowledge of matter by thought is granted by such infinity. If the first tenet is Spinozist, the second

<sup>23</sup> Johannes Regius, *Cartesius versus Spinozismi architectus* (Franeker: Halma, 1719), 126–127.

<sup>24</sup> See Leibniz to De Volder, 31 December 1700, in Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. Carl I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1875–1890), 2:223; *ibid.*, 229: De Volder to Leibniz, 7 October 1701. Cf. Descartes’s *Principia*, I.51–52

<sup>25</sup> See the letter of De Volder to Leibniz of 18 February 1699: Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften* (see above, n. 24), 166.

<sup>26</sup> Burchard de Volder, *Exercitationes academicae quibus Ren. Cartesii philosophia defenditur adversus Petri Danielis Huetii Episcopi Suessionensis Censuram philosophiae cartesianae* (Amsterdam: Van Ravestein, 1695), section *De idea Dei*, thesis 17.

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough discussion, see Wim Klever, “Hudde’s Question on God’s Uniqueness; A Reconstruction on the Basis of Van Limborch’s Correspondence with John Locke,” *Studia Spinozana* 5 (1989), 327–358; Giuliana Di Biase, “John Locke on Monotheism. A Dispute with Johannes Hudde,” *Archivio di filosofia* 82/1 (2014), 317–329.

<sup>28</sup> Van Limborch to Locke, 2/12 September 1698, in John Locke, *The Correspondence*, ed. Esmond Samuel De Beer (Oxford, 1976–1989), 464–465.



represents De Volder's non-Spinozist solution to the problem of the possibility of thought to know extension.

In fact, it was precisely De Volder's version of 'absolute dualism' that led him to avoid embracing monism as a solution to the problem of the interaction between soul and body, even if his account of causality would have led to substance monism when applied to divine creation. The problem of mind-body relations was as central to his metaphysics as was the question of the activity of matter. De Volder's *Oratio de rationis viribus* (1698) opens with the remark that the explanation of the body-soul relations just falls beyond the powers of our reason, because one cannot relate their ideas by any concept which is common to both. Like Spinoza, De Volder, too, saw the mental and the physical domains as 'closed systems', because no concept can bridge them. All we can know is that movements and ideas proceed *pari passu*.<sup>29</sup> In his subsequent correspondence with Leibniz, while looking for a solution to this issue, he seemed indeed to favour the idea of a soul-body parallelism, according to which soul can be conceived as having the idea of the body – in turn conceived as a machine – whose changes 'parallel' those of the body:

[I]magine a machine put together from many parts [...]. Imagine a soul, in which there is an adequate idea of this machine and of all its parts [...]; nothing will be represented in it which is not in the machine, and whatever change obtains among the parts of that machine, a representation of this will follow necessarily from the idea. And vice versa.<sup>30</sup>

This was De Volder's interpretation of Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony, the 'Spinozist flavour' of which did not go unnoticed by Leibniz. The latter, as a consequence, was very careful in his answer to De Volder, referring to De Volder's own differentiation between soul and the idea of the body, and remarking that the soul has the idea of the body but it is not itself the idea of the body.<sup>31</sup> In any case, De Volder did not accept Leibniz's theory, for the reason that it still failed to explain by natural means the cause of the changes in the body, for body (*contra* Spinoza) is not active. As a matter of fact, De Volder never came to a solution of these issues himself. As testified by his biographer and friend, Jean Le Clerc, he just came to be annoyed at teaching Descartes's metaphysics, which he could not replace with any alternative theory.<sup>32</sup> After his death, however, his ideas came to be used by one of his students, Jacob Wittich, in the context of the highly problematic topic of the nature of God. It was only at that point that De Volder's 'Spinozist' principles became

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<sup>29</sup> Burchard de Volder, *Oratio de rationis viribus, et usu in scientiis* (Leiden: Haring, 1698), 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> De Volder to Leibniz, 18 February 1699, Lodge, *Correspondence* (see above, n. 12), 63.

<sup>31</sup> Leibniz to De Volder, 3 April 1699, *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Le Clerc, "Éloge de feu Mr. de Volder," (see above, n. 10), 398–399.

patent.

#### 4. The *controversia Driessenio-Wittichiana*

In his 1718 *Apologia pro vera et saniore philosophia*, Ruardus Andala reports that he had warned of the dangers entailed in De Volder's teachings since 1705, when he had started his academic disputations. Andala had hoped that "from De Volder's school harmful men would not come to get positions in churches and academies." After some years had passed without problems, in 1711 he heard about Wittich's *De natura Dei*, in which he found "multiple dangerous, absurd, abominable principles."<sup>33</sup> When Wittich tried to assume a post in Groningen in 1717, these principles came into full light, with Antonius Driessen (professor of theology) vigorously opposing Wittich's appointment and sending the disputation to Dutch theologians (including Roëll) for judgment, thereby initiating a quarrel which lasted until the early 1720s.<sup>34</sup> The issue Wittich dealt with was how to ascertain, on a philosophical basis, the nature of God as the most perfect being. In particular, a central issue was to explain how God could have created matter when God is incorporeal.<sup>35</sup> Wittich developed his disputation upon Spinoza's third proposition of the *Ethica*, according to which "if things have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other,"<sup>36</sup> and by assuming five additional premises. As both the defenders and the opponents of Wittich were to note in the disputation there were "some unusual expressions [...] yet that those who have enjoyed Mr. De Volder's teaching can explain their meaning very well."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Wittich overtly assumed from De Volder's *Exercitationes* the above-mentioned principle according to which no idea of a substance involves its own negation – criticized by Driessen as "taken from the secrets of Spinozism"<sup>38</sup> – and (without mentioning his source) all De Volder's further four premises. They include that (1) knowledge depends on ideas only, (2) mind can conceive only the attributes of extension and thought, (3) the differences between ideas match those between the things they represent, and (4) the necessary connection between ideas matches the necessary connections

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<sup>33</sup> Ruardus Andala, *Apologia pro vera et saniore philosophia* (Franeker: Halma, 1718), 139–140.

<sup>34</sup> On the quarrel, see Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (see above, n. 2), chapter 23; Aza Goudriaan, "Anthonius Driessen contra Jacob Wittich: over God, de schepping en causaliteit," in *Spinoza en de scholastiek*, ed. Gunther Coppens (Leuven, 2003), 53–68.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Wittich, "De natura Dei Disputatio," in Taco Hajo van den Honert, *Repraesentatio cur ad criminationes quibus Antonius Driessen Jacob. Wittichum [...] a cathedra Groningana arcere conatus est nihil responderit; addita est Wittichii de natura Dei Disputatio* (Leiden: Luchtmans, 1718), 24 and 26–27.

<sup>36</sup> Spinoza, *The Collected Works* (see above, n. 18), 1:410.

<sup>37</sup> Taco Hajo van den Honert, *Repraesentatio altera* (Leiden: Luchtmans, 1718), 41. It was cited in Jacob Leydekker, *De blyde Spinosist* (Rotterdam: Van Doesburg, 1719), 1–2 (unnumbered pages). Cf. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (see above, n. 2), 439.

<sup>38</sup> Antonius Driessen, *Responsionum Wittichianarum refutatio* (Groningen: Spandaw, 1718), 34.

between the things they represent.<sup>39</sup> By building on these principles, however, Wittich did not come to solve the problem of the nature of God by rational means. After having rejected the idea that God can create matter and act on matter because He is extended ‘eminently’ rather than ‘formally’, namely, that God can create matter without being material – a solution adopted by his uncle Christoph<sup>40</sup> – Wittich reverted to the biblical text of *Ecclesiastes*, according to which “God’s ways are as mysterious as the pathways of the wind.”<sup>41</sup>

To revert to revelation in order to solve a philosophical problem was not new in Dutch Cartesianism: circa 70 years before, the same strategy had been used to solve the issue of the nature of the soul by Henricus Regius, who was labelled by another famous Cartesian, Johannes de Raey, as the “forerunner of Spinoza” as late as 1692. De Raey accused Regius of having paved the way to Spinozism since he had abandoned Descartes’s metaphysics and could not decide whether soul is a substance, a mode, or an attribute of a substance.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, De Volder, too, was labelled as having betrayed Descartes. In his treatment of De Volder’s positions in his *Examen Ethicae Geulingii* (1716), Andala argued he did not disapprove of the idea to have recourse to a theological solution in cases such as the nature of God or the nature of mind-body relations, provided that philosophy did not try to naturalize these problems in the first place. To aim at such naturalist interpretations was the move made by De Volder (with respect to the mind-body problem), Wittich (with respect to the nature of God) and of course Spinoza.<sup>43</sup> As Han van Ruler has highlighted,

[Andala] strongly disapproves of De Volder’s way of emphasizing that reason cannot offer any intelligible account of the interaction of body and soul. According to Andala, it made no sense to search for a ‘necessary’ or ‘natural’ connection, since God freely established an ‘arbitrary’ connection between body and the soul. To aim at a rational interpretation of the interaction of movement and thought, is to do exactly what Spinoza did. Accordingly, we should not, says Andala, abandon the Cartesian method of explaining all bodily action mechanically whilst at the same time linking physiological causes to thoughts [...], since one might end up doubting the substantial difference between the mental and the physical.<sup>44</sup>

De Volder’s absolute dualism and his notion of substance were thus labelled as leading to

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<sup>39</sup> Wittich, “De natura Dei Disputatio,” (see above, n. 35), 7–12; cf. De Volder, *Exercitationes* (see above, n. 26), section *De Deo*, theses 5, 13–14, and section *De idea Dei*, thesis 17.

<sup>40</sup> Christoph Wittich, *Anti-Spinoza* (Amsterdam: Wolters, 1690), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Wittich, “De natura Dei Disputatio,” (see above, n. 35), 18–20.

<sup>42</sup> Johannes de Raey, *Cogitata de interpretatione* (Amsterdam: Wetstein, 1692), 666.

<sup>43</sup> Ruardus Andala, *Examen Ethicae Geulingii* (Franeker: Bleck, 1716), 18–19.

<sup>44</sup> Han van Ruler, “The Shipwreck of Belief and Eternal Bliss: Philosophy and Religion in Later Dutch Cartesianism,” in *The Early Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic, 1650–1750*, ed. Wiep van Bunge (Leiden-Boston, 2003), 109–136, there 110, note 4.

Spinozism as a possible outcome: both from the Cartesian perspective of Andala, and from anti-Cartesian perspectives such as those of Leibniz or Johannes Regius. To what extent, however, was De Volder a follower of Spinoza? To come to some conclusion, we need to look at further sources, namely those reporting his classroom teaching at Leiden, and his views on religion and biblical interpretation.

## 5. De Volder's Spinozism Reassessed

In the previous sections, I have considered the ideas De Volder expressed in his academic disputations, exercises, and correspondence. A further source is also to be considered, however, namely his commentaries on Descartes's *Principia*, which are extant in the form of handwritten dictations to students. The commentary that is relevant to us has survived in two copies, one of which is partial and is dated 1690 by the copyist; it is extant at The Hague. The other is extant at Hamburg and is complete.<sup>45</sup> The original redaction of this commentary, however, can be traced back before 1673, because it contains a wrong quantification of centrifugal force, while the other commentary (which has survived in a much larger number of copies) provides a correct quantification, consistent with the exposition given by Christiaan Huygens in his *Horologium oscillatorium* (1673).<sup>46</sup> It is in the first, pre-1673 commentary that De Volder overtly uses Spinoza to illustrate a hydrodynamical principle which is at the basis of Descartes's vortex theory. According to the principle, a mass of fluid, passing from a large to a narrower tube, increases its speed.<sup>47</sup> This principle was formalized first by Benedetto Castelli,<sup>48</sup> and was then presented by Spinoza in his *Principia philosophiae cartesianae* (1663), to which, by dictating "vide Spinozam in principiorum Cartesii partem secundam axiomatica XIV," De Volder re-directs the reader.<sup>49</sup> In the work, this principle was neither overtly 'Spinozist', nor philosophically or theologically heterodox. However, positively mentioning Spinoza in an academic dictation after 1670 (when De Volder became professor at Leiden), in the years when Spinoza was 'already Spinoza' certainly suggests De Volder's sympathy for the Jewish philosopher, who is moreover used as a source of clarification of Descartes's ideas, at least in physics. Also, it is noteworthy that the overt reference to Spinoza disappeared in the second commentary, which probably had a successive redaction during or after the Leiden crisis of 1674–1676. At that point, De Volder had good reasons no longer expressly to

<sup>45</sup> The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 72 A 7; Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. philos. 273.

<sup>46</sup> Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky, Cod. philos. 274, 66.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Descartes's *Principia*, IV.49.

<sup>48</sup> Benedetto Castelli, *Della misura dell'acque correnti* (Rome: Stamparia Camerale, 1628), 9–12.

<sup>49</sup> Cod. Philos. 273 (see above, n. 45), 101.

use Spinoza's texts.

In metaphysics, however, De Volder did not fully endorse Spinoza's views, as we saw in the previous sections. Moreover, De Volder had views on religion and biblical interpretation which were at odds with Spinoza's. In his 1709 eulogy for De Volder, Jacob Gronovius reported that De Volder engaged himself with daily study of the Bible in order to ascertain the passages aimed at salvation. This was consistent with a Cartesio-Cocceian approach to theology,<sup>50</sup> but also with his Menonite education. Notably, a disputation held by Alexander de Bie at Amsterdam in 1658, in which De Volder was the *respondens* (as a student), was dedicated by De Volder to Galenus Abrahamszoon de Haan, at that time physician and minister at the Menonite Church gathering at the Amsterdam church Bij het Lam – regularly attended by De Volder's father, the landscape painter Joost de Volder.<sup>51</sup> As reconstructed by Andrew Fix, De Haan had a markedly 'liberal' approach to the articles of faith, deeming as necessary for a believer only those aiming at salvation.<sup>52</sup> This was the ideal of the 'invisible Church', which allowed De Volder, for instance, to enter into the Walloon Church as a condition of his appointment at Leiden in 1670.<sup>53</sup> Amongst De Volder's papers, Gronovius found a *Collectio eorum quae aperto sensu in SS. commendantur ut omnino necessaria scitu vel factu ad salutem, sequentibus numeris ad denotanda illa loca*. Moreover, Gronovius noticed a paper by De Volder in which the Greek text of the Letters of Paul and the Apocalypse were compared – with extensive annotations – with the Vulgate edition of the Bible.<sup>54</sup> This testifies to his philological interest in Scripture, which was however quite different from the hermeneutical approach adopted by Spinoza. Whereas the latter was aimed at ascertaining the human and historical character of the biblical message, De Volder's approach was more similar to that of a believer aiming at a better understanding of the holy message for the sake of his own salvation.

In the light of all this, coming to a conclusion on De Volder's Spinozism is still not easy. There is a large amount of evidence that De Volder certainly had sympathies for Spinozism, that he considered Spinoza as a reliable interpreter of Descartes (at least in physics), and that he was a necessitarian. Moreover, he endorsed a quasi-Spinozist view of the attributes of extension and thought, both considered to be infinite and numerically unique. What is obviously lacking here in

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<sup>50</sup> Ernestine van der Wall, "Cartesianism and Cocceianism: A Natural Alliance?" in *De l'humanisme aux Lumières, Bayle et le protestantisme*, ed. Michelle Magdelaine (Paris-Oxford, 1996), 445–455.

<sup>51</sup> Ruud Lambour, "Het doopsgezind milieu van Michiel van Musscher (1645–1705) en van andere schilders in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam: een revisie en ontdekking," *Oud Holland* 125/4 (2012), 193–214.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Fix, "Mennonites and Collegiants in Holland 1630–1700," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 64 (1990), 160–177.

<sup>53</sup> Erik Jorink, "Modus politicus vivendi: Nicolaus Steno and the Dutch (Swammerdam, Spinoza and Other Friends), 1660–1664," in *Steno and the Philosophers*, ed. Raphaële Andrault and Mogens Laerke (Leiden, 2018), 13–44.

<sup>54</sup> Jacob Gronovius, *Burcheri de Volder laudatio* (Leiden: Boutestein, 1709), 28–29.

order for De Volder to be seen as a fully Spinozist thinker, is precisely the substance monism which could bridge such attributes. In his texts, there is ground for such monism: namely his account of causality, which, if applied to divine agency, would entail that thought and extension are two necessary effects and therefore two essential attributes of God. Only in this light might we consider De Volder a monist, but he never actually applied his theory of causality to divine causation. Nor did De Volder accept Spinoza's biblical hermeneutics. In his refusal to consider divine causality and to adopt a philosophical hermeneutics of the Bible, De Volder was in fact true to the line of thought in Dutch Cartesianism which, starting with Heidanus, Christopher Wittich and De Raey, endorsed a 'separation thesis' between philosophical and theological problems.<sup>55</sup> It was such a separation, most probably, that led him not to push his philosophical principles to their most dangerous consequences.

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<sup>55</sup> Alexander Douglas, "Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51/4 (2013), 567–588.