

VU Research Portal

De logosfilosofie van Jan Woltjer (1849-1917)

Nijhoff, R.A.

2014

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Nijhoff, R. A. (2014). *De logosfilosofie van Jan Woltjer (1849-1917): Logos en wijsbegeerte aan de vroege Vrije Universiteit*. [, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Summary

Title: *The logophilosophy of Jan Woltjer (1849–1917)*

Subtitle: *Logos and philosophy at the early Vrije Universiteit*

Jan Woltjer (1849–1917) was the first professor at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, who started to build up a Christian philosophy systematically, whereas some effort in this field can be attributed to the theologians Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Philippus Hoedemaker and Willem Geesink.

Woltjer completed his classical studies in 1877 with a thesis on the thinking of Lucretius compared to that of Epicurus. A year after the Vrije Universiteit opened its doors, Woltjer delivered his inaugural speech as professor in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy (1881). In Amsterdam he was co-founder and rector of the *Gereformeerd Gymnasium* (Reformed Grammar-school) and member of the board of the Seminary for the primary education teachers of the *Christelijk Nationaal Onderwijs* (Christian National Education). Over and above all this he became senator for the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1902.

For more than twenty years Woltjer was the only professor appointed in the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy. He remained *the face* of faculty until his death. He devoted most of his academic speeches and of his lecture series *Encyclopaedia Philologiae* to philosophy. In these he sought to find bridges between philosophy and his Christian faith. This search was typical for the Neo-Calvinist context of the Vrije Universiteit where he assumed his responsibilities for philosophy. He digested classical, medieval and modern philosophical traditions, and became acquainted with the way of thinking in Eastern worldviews and literature such as the Vedas. He began his philosophical work at the end of a century that

commuted between idealism and materialism. He responded to issues that he derived from developments both in his time of life and at the young Vrije Universiteit.

Woltjer seeks to warrant the Christian contents of his philosophy by incorporating from the start the New Testament passages about Jesus Christ as the divine Logos actively involved in the creation and sustainance of the world. This point of departure guides his thinking about the relation between God, the Logos and the world (ontology), about human beings as *imago dei* (anthropology) and about the given fact that the world is knowable to human beings (epistemology). These are philosophical consequences that reach beyond a biblical or theological-philosophical doctrine about the Logos Himself. The Logos-related main lines in Woltjer's ontology, anthropology and epistemology cohere as a whole. The sum total of these elements functions on its turn as a framework carrying his philosophy as a whole. It is to this framework (the sum total of Logos-related main lines) that the term *logosphilosophy* in the title refers. Because this Logos-orientation is distinctive for Woltjer's philosophical thought as a whole one can characterise this comprehensive body of thought as a logosphilosophy, too.

The two introductory chapters contain a description of Woltjer as a person and the reasons to pay attention to his logosphilosophy (1), and a survey of his sources and philosophical context (2). In the order of ontology, anthropology and epistemology the main lines of Woltjer's treatment of these fields are covered (3, 4, 5). In the evaluation of his logosphilosophy, finally, the focus of attention moves to the criticism ushered by his philosophical successors at the Vrije Universiteit, Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven and the latter's brother-in-law, Herman Dooyeweerd (6). It can be deduced from this research that these critical voices reflect Woltjer's philosophical heritage at the same time. For that reason the evaluation offers an assessment of this continuing influence of his philosophical thought, including points of lasting interest.

Woltjer's ontology is characterised by a type of realism. He bases this position on the given of a created world endowed with properties by the Creator before human beings ever could perceive them. Properties are influences that things exert on one another or on an observing subject. In the mutual relationships and connections among things the human mind perceives patterns which strike it as ordered.

Woltjer can be called an idealist because he gives primacy to the immaterial, more specific: to ideas, above the material. God created the world by the Logos (the Word). With *Logos* Woltjer refers primarily to God's *inward* thought or ideas or to his *outward* speech (as in the pronouncements of creation), or to both together, including the will that is related to both (the will: the decrees and the powers not only to create the world and its diversity of powers, but to sustain them as well). Woltjer relates the creation by *speech* to God's sovereign, powerful and effective authority, but predominantly to the self-revelation of the Creator who is speaking now even out of the created world.

By his emphasis on the *expression* of ideas in matter (among other options) Woltjer distances himself from an absolute idealism that spiritualises matter (Berkeley), and from

kinds of pantheism. Woltjer does distinguish matter and (divine) mind. According to him, the Creator has expressed in *material* things *archetypal* ideas originally residing in his *inner Logos* – as if these things are words or sculptures in which human beings perceive immanent principles or *ectypal* ideas. Here Woltjer has in mind both inorganic things, even basic constituents of matter, and organic things, both individual ones and their kinds.

In his anthropology Woltjer is dualistic in the sense that he distinguishes body and soul (spirit). Without any implication of contempt he calls the human body the instrument of the human spirit. They belong together (although a human spirit can live without its body). Especially the functioning of the human *logos* shows that human beings are created as God's image. This *logos* itself is image of the divine Logos. *Logos* in its most restricted but characteristic sense (according to Woltjer) is the intellect, thinking that synthesises. Speaking about the *inward logos* of a human being Woltjer can refer to the higher spiritual capacities of man, too (intellect, reason, imagination, intuition); sometimes he refers to the human soul as a whole. Speaking about the *outward logos* Woltjer refers to human discourse (speech; secondary: written texts). The *inward* and the *outward logos* combined together can be referred to as *logos*, too, by Woltjer. Insofar the will has its source in the (inner) *logos*, he can speak about a *reasonable will*.

To human faculties or functions Woltjer applies a terminology of *higher* and *lower*, e.g. a higher or lower (faculty of) feeling. Reason should lord over the other spiritual and the corporeal faculties of man. However, compared to a classical view of man (comprising *logos*, *thumos*, *pathos*) it is striking that Woltjer does not restrict himself to this scheme of *higher* and *lower*, but at the same time avails himself of a scheme of *inner* and *outer*. Intellect and reason are meant to produce clarity, but the human spirit consists of deeper layers, more inward and less conscious, which influences conscious thinking. Woltjer speaks appreciatively about the influence by the higher faculty of feeling located in the heart, e.g. producing intuitions. In this conception Woltjer's anthropology shows affinities with a Romantic, expressivistic view of humanity (Herder), while an analogous scheme of 'inner and outer' is played out in the distinction between the *inward* and the *outward logos*. Corporeal and spiritual faculties he can describe as functions of the material body and functions of the soul respectively. The body is outward and visible, the soul inward and invisible, having the *I* as its centre.

Woltjer describes the human *logos* as individually unique (e.g. because of being gifted differently). However, all human beings are characterised by the display of a similar *logos*. For that reason Woltjer does not consider the individual *logos* to be the subject of science, but the *logos* of *humanity*. This *logos* is not an independent *hypostasis* (adding one to the total number of human *logoi*). Human beings exert influences on one another in several ways, not the least by their *ouward logos* (speech and text). Humanity is united by its corporeal descent, but is meant to form a spiritual unity, too. However, this spiritual unity is still broken because of evil. As a consequence of this Woltjer distinguishes the *logos* of

one people or language area from that of other peoples or language areas. Each *logos* is developing itself, has distinctive characteristics in specific periods (so that Woltjer speaks of the spirit of an age). In a specific period a specific people, race or polity can have a leading position, e.g. the Roman Empire in its time.

In his epistemology Woltjer is no naïve realist. He aims at a ‘Christian epistemology’. Such an epistemology can be called ‘transcendental idealist’, because ideas that determine knowledge precede the objects to be known. Here Woltjer has divine ideas in mind. At the same time he wants to characterise this epistemology, in opposition to a Kantian idealism, as ‘transcendental realism’: knowledge of things on the one hand is dependent on the nature of the human faculty of knowing, but at the other hand on the nature of the things themselves. Kantians cannot prove that the world is *not* such as we know it. Kant however goes further than merely the conclusion that we cannot be *sure* about this knowability of the world as it is; he even concludes that we are not *able* to know a *Ding an sich* or the real existence of space and time.

The knowability of material things Woltjer argues on the basis of both (a) the *distinction* between the human mind (spirit) and the material world, and (b) the *similarity* of the ideas in things and those in the human mind. By means of the body humanity is connected to the material world, but this does not imply that things are able to cause representations or knowledge in the mind, via a causal sequence of impressions on the senses, brought to the brains by the nerves. Impressions, representations and concepts are contents of the human consciousness (or descend into the unconscious layers of the the soul). They belong to a different, spiritual order, on which whatever belongs to the material one cannot exert any direct influence. The human mind is not a *tabula rasa*, but actively, albeit often re-actively, involved in the formation of knowledge.

The formation of knowledge is possible because the human faculty of knowing is able to construct representations out of sense impressions, and knowledge in the form of judgements consisting of concepts and ideas. Resulting ideas, if correctly formed, are similar to the ideas that the Creator has *pre-thought* when He made things. So a human being is thinking God’s thoughts *after* Him (‘afterthought’). By this afterthought, human beings can make predictions that do conform to situations in the future that result from natural processes (e.g. planetary movements). Woltjer is not surprised that a human being behind the things supposes a mind that in a way is similar to his own. In the same vein, someone deciphering a cuneiform cylinder gets acquainted to someone possessing a similar mind as he himself. Ultimately Woltjer compares the world and even every single thing to a book, the letters of which (the sense impressions) generally human beings readily spell, because the the human *logos* has a desire that always reaches out to the the divine Logos.

This research of Woltjer’s *logosphilosophy* can lead to a positive appreciation of his unwavering Logo-centric construal of philosophy – Logo-centric in a Christian sense. At the same time this logosphilosophy gives rise to no small number of critical questions.

However, the evaluation in the closing chapter is restricted to points of criticism specifically aimed at Woltjer by his philosophical heirs, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd. Possibly because Woltjer until his death guided Vollenhoven in his doctoral study, Vollenhoven pays more homage to his mentor than Dooyeweerd does. Apart from that, Dooyeweerd's points of criticism often fail to do justice to Woltjer's nuanced philosophical thought. This research leads, for example, to the conclusion that Dooyeweerd ignores the similarity in view that Woltjer has with Kuyper (and with Dooyeweerd himself) concerning the human heart as the *religious root* of human functioning. The human *logos*-as-intellect is neither separate from this nor in a dominating position above it. While Woltjer holds together in his vision the *thought* and *will* of the Creator, Kuyper's emphasis on the Creator's sovereign *will* is determinative for Dooyeweerd's thinking: because of his resistance to each and every overestimation of theoretical thought he has put this will central to his philosophy.

The next section in the closing chapter is dedicated to an evaluation of Vollenhoven's points of criticism. After that, an assessment is given of elements in Woltjer's philosophical thought that have lasting importance. First of all, this can be said about the continuity between Woltjer and his philosophical successors, even in their critical reactions to his thought. Not without reason Vollenhoven gave his inaugural oration the title *Logos and ratio* (1926). Another example is the metaphor (or reality?) of the *expressive* character of the world, as mentioned especially by Dooyeweerd. Finally, the enduring significance of Woltjer's philosophical thinking can be found in its actuality in the Twenty First Century. New attention is given to the historical, theological and philosophical reconstruction of Neocalvinist thought (Eglinton, Flipse). When this attention is focused on Woltjer, a knowledge gap can be filled that exists between Kuyper and Bavinck. With respect to the contents of Woltjer's thinking, new intellectual space is created to take seriously a (not merely mechanical, but also) teleological view of the development of consciousness, cognition and values (Nagel). Of course Woltjer is using the philosophical methods and opinions he was aware of in his own time, nevertheless both his open minded and integrative way of thinking and the positions he defends can still inspire his readers today.