

## The Idiosyncratic Philosophy of Herman De Dijn

At the end of 2008 Herman De Dijn (1943-) was awarded the title of Professor Emeritus at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In recent decades De Dijn has undoubtedly been one of the most prominent voices in the philosophical landscape of the Low Countries. He first made his name as an eminent authority on the work of Spinoza and Hume, about whom he published in specialised international periodicals. After publishing *Rationality and its Limits* (De rationaliteit en haar grenzen) with Arnold Burms in 1986 he began to write cultural-philosophical essays, adopted positions in all manner of social and cultural-philosophical debates and wrote contributions for newspapers and magazines in which he did not hesitate to adopt controversial and challenging points of view.

De Dijn's methodological approach may have evolved, but that is certainly not true of the intrinsic position that he espouses. That there is no yawning gap between the scholar De Dijn and the cultural philosopher is most obvious in his book, *Modernité et Tradition. Essais sur l'entre-deux*, the product of the lectures he gave at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) during the 2001 academic year. This is the key book for anyone wanting to gain an insight into the evolution of De Dijn's thinking, because its explicit theme is the link between his studies of Spinoza and Hume on the one hand, and on the other his cultural-philosophical viewpoints on subjects such as the tension between modern and postmodern and the relationship between religion and ethics or between religion and science. Far more than just a Spinoza-and-Hume scholar, De Dijn is a 'real' philosopher who, using the heritage of these thinkers and others, has developed his own philosophy with which he responds to the challenges of the age.

How to live in a culture in which the traditional frameworks of meaning have largely disappeared? For Herman De Dijn it is this question that constitutes the challenge of our time. His answer is clear: we must endeavour to endure the tension between tradition and modernity, because we know that there is an ir-

revocable division between the abstract world of the scientist and the real world of everyday life. The theme of all of his books from 1986 on is the gulf between scientific knowledge and real life, starting from the proposition that science cannot answer man's most fundamental questions. If we can provide answers, we will only find them in the way people live and converse in a human culture.

So what is the essence of this position? It is about no less than safeguarding and nurturing key human values and attitudes, which need protecting from the ever-increasing tendency towards objectification. Values and attitudes of trust, hope, humility, vulnerability, freedom and responsibility typify man not as a biological being, but as an interactive player who is part of a social and symbolic environment. After all it is these basic attitudes, which cannot be substantiated by rationality, that make man what he is in relationship to others and the world, and which we should continue to nurture.

This philosophical position is also typical of Herman De Dijn as a policymaker. Two examples: as editor-in-chief of the leading philosophical periodical in the Low Countries, *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, he has always, contrary to the spirit of the times, defended the continued use of Dutch as a philosophical language. His reason for doing so was clear: every philosopher expresses him/herself in the most nuanced way in his/her mother tongue, and philosophy depends on nuance. That is a courageous, consistent position that has not been adopted by the majority of philosophers in the Low Countries.

A logical extension of this is that, as Vice-Chancellor of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, De Dijn has always had reservations about the dominant 'bibliometric' model whereby academic output is assessed on the basis of the model used in the sciences. These reservations are part of a broader defence of the university as a place that needs to accommodate not only specialised research, but also the search for wisdom.

The defence of Dutch as a philosophical mother tongue and of the university as an institution where 'thinking' takes place ties in with De Dijn's defence of the religious position and of the ethical worth of each individual. In the end these are all examples of what is

a constant in De Dijn's oeuvre: the defence of 'embodied meaning'. There can be no respect for human rights if that respect does not have its roots in respect for the vulnerability of each actual individual; there can be no openness for the religious, if all sensitivity to the symbolic power of signs disappears. Any talk of ideals is impotent if those ideals are not rooted in recognition of the particularity that is peculiar to concrete reality.

Herman De Dijn's philosophy has never been a purely intellectual game. With him, as with every important philosopher, it has always been a matter of commitment, in the service of which philosophy was used. So for many people De Dijn has been a thorn in their flesh. But then, in philosophical circles that is actually the greatest compliment.

Guido Vanheeswijck

*Translated by Lindsey Edwards*