

Wolfgang Bartuschat: An Obituary

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Abstract

This is an obituary on Wolfgang Bartuschat (May 13, 1938 – August 10, 2022), an eminent Spinoza scholar at Universität Hamburg. As an interpreter, Bartuschat emphasized the human and individual perspective in Spinoza's metaphysical and political thought. Bartuschat will also be remembered as an excellent translator and editor.

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Professor Wolfgang Bartuschat died on August 10, 2022 at the age of 84. From 1977 until his retirement in 2002, he was a professor of philosophy at Universität Hamburg, where he worked on the history of philosophy from Descartes to Hegel, with a particular focus on Spinoza and Kant.

Wolfgang Bartuschat was born on May 13, 1938 in Königsberg. His family later fled to Saxony and eventually to Düsseldorf, where Bartuschat earned his high-school diploma (*Abitur*) in 1958. In the same year, he enrolled at Universität Hamburg to study philosophy, German literature, and sociology, and attended classes taught by, among others, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker and Hans Blumenberg. But the 20-year-old Bartuschat was so intrigued by Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics that after only one year in Hamburg, he moved to Heidelberg to study with Gadamer himself. After Heidelberg, an interest in studying theater arts took Bartuschat to Vienna; a short time later, Bartuschat went to Bonn to study with the famous literary historian Richard Alewyn, who wanted Bartuschat to go on to a career in German literature. Preferring a career in philosophy, Bartuschat moved to Freie Universität in Berlin, where Dieter Henrich was teaching at the time, and then moved back to Heidelberg to work with Gadamer on a doctoral thesis on Nietzsche's philosophy of will. After defending his thesis in 1964, Bartuschat taught at Heidelberg until moving to Hamburg in 1970 to become Reiner Wiehl's research assistant. Bartuschat submitted his habilitation (a second major project, beyond the dissertation, that makes one eligible for a professorship) on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1971 and was promoted to his professorship at Universität Hamburg in 1977.

After his habilitation, Bartuschat increasingly devoted himself to studying Spinoza, thereby embarking on an intellectual journey that lasted until the end of his life. He had an enormous and

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lasting impact on German Spinoza research in two roles: first, as a brilliant commentator and interpreter of Spinoza's thought, and second, as a careful editor and translator of Spinoza's philosophical writings.

In his role as a commentator, Bartuschat persistently argued that Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics shouldn't be understood as a mere theory of the absolute, but as a theory of the absolute complemented by a distinctively human perspective, a metaphysics deliberately complemented by a theory of human well-being. Bartuschat developed this interpretation in numerous articles (many of which are compiled in his *Spinozas Philosophie: über den Zusammenhang von Metaphysik und Ethik*, 2017) as well as in his monograph *Spinozas Theorie des Menschen* (1992). He was also the author of what remains one of the best introductions to Spinoza in German (Beck 1996; 2nd ed. 2006).

Bartuschat's interpretation opposes the widespread reading of Spinoza as someone who tried to deduce his ethical claims from his metaphysical views about substance or the absolute. In fact, Bartuschat agrees with Hegel's famous criticism that Spinoza fails to deduce any substantive characteristics of particulars from his abstract theory of substance or the absolute, let alone any characteristics that could be used to develop any informative ethics. Unlike Hegel, however, Bartuschat does not blame Spinoza for the inability to deductively determine the individual from the absolute, since on his reading, Spinoza never intended such a deduction in the first place. According to Bartuschat, Spinoza's metaphysics (i.e., his theory of the absolute) and his ethics (i.e., his theory of human beings and the possibility of a good life) instead mutually determine each other such that one cannot be had without the other. On the one hand, a theory of the absolute requires a theory of human beings, since it is only against this backdrop that we can appreciate how we tend to conceive of the absolute and thus learn about the pitfalls we should be aware of when we seek to come up with an adequate conception of the absolute. On the other hand, a realistic theory of a good human life requires a robust theory of the absolute: understanding the absolute is a prerequisite for gaining a precise and accurate understanding of our finite condition, which we need in order to correctly assess our options about leading a good life.

In his later years, Bartuschat became increasingly intrigued by Spinoza's political philosophy and was particularly interested in the relationship between the fundamental ontological framework and more particular claims about human beings, community, law, and the state. Like many other commentators over the last 40 years, Bartuschat insisted on the specific form of argumentation of the two political treatises, as well as on the basic premise that the realm of politics and society will always be marked by irrationality and unreason. Bartuschat underscored that Spinoza's politics responds to this condition in a non-cynical and non-strategic way: it searches for a rational way to deal with irrational citizens. For Bartuschat, the importance of this lies less in the intersubjective or transindividual factors highlighted by many French and Italian colleagues. For Bartuschat, Spinoza is a thinker of the individual subject and their freedom. Thus, as a metaphysician and epistemologist, Bartuschat's Spinoza seeks to vindicate, rather than overcome, human individuality; Spinoza's political writings show how the state may both defend and threaten human individuality. So understood, Spinoza is more a forerunner of Kant than of Marx or Nietzsche; the possibility of an alternative, radical form of liberalism to be constructed with Spinozist means might be the lasting promise of this reading.

In his role as an editor and translator, Bartuschat has been continuously active since 1978: first as an editor of Arthur Buchenau's early 20th-century German translations of Spinoza's works, and then, since the mid-1990s, as a re-translator and editor of all of Spinoza's Latin and Dutch works and letters. As a result of Bartuschat's work, researchers and teachers working in German can rely on an edition of Spinoza's works that is not only modern and accurate, but also highly philosophically informed. Up until recently, the German edition of Spinoza's collected writings that amended Carl Gebhardt's groundbreaking editorial work from the 1920s was the global academic benchmark in terms of textual research and documentation. While this benchmark is now the new Paris edition, for German readers, Spinoza still speaks in a voice and tone found and invented by Bartuschat.

Bartuschat also shaped the history of philosophy as an editor of the *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, a position he took alongside Dorothea Frede, a colleague at Hamburg, in 1992. From 1992 to 2010, he helped make the *Archiv* one of the most respected journals for the history of philosophy in the world.

When Bartuschat died in his house close to the Ohlsdorf cemetery, where he was buried on August 24, 2022, the German-speaking world lost one of its most prolific, influential, and inspiring interpreters of Spinoza.

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