

Sophie's World: If this is Tuesday, it must be Spinoza

reviewed by Pieter Mostert

The history of philosophy is like a town. Walking around in it, we can meet philosophers from the past at any corner. Despite the distances in time, we feel their presence. Without any hesitation we cross the barriers of ages, languages and cultures; we listen to Socrates, Spinoza and Freud on the same afternoon. Afterwards we may wonder what it was that Spinoza had to say to us. We should know, as Spinoza is on the list of "what every American needs to know" (the subtitle of E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*, 1987). Yes, he is on the list, between the Sphinx and the Spirit of St. Louis. So we should know something about him. Let us say: "Spinoza was a strong determinist and believed in an unshakeable logical necessity". That is the one-liner that the author of *Bluffyour way in Philosophy [1985]* suggests you use. It is easy enough to memorize and it sounds like any literate American could understand it. But this is cardboard understanding in a cardboard town

In Jostein Gaarder's "novel" *Sophie's World*, Sophie enters the town of philosophy with some vague metaphysical idea and seems to leave it with that same vague idea. Does she learn from the history of philosophy? Does she get a better understanding of the world and of herself? I doubt it. My doubts stem from some serious contradictions between what I hold to be a reasonable way of handling the history of philosophy and what happens in Gaarder's book. At this point, one may brush aside my doubts by reminding me that the author calls his book a novel; fiction therefore. But does this imply that what is said about Spinoza is no more than an 'artistic impression' of Spinoza, and that it does not need to be correct factually? I do not think so. Many readers and reviewers would feel misled, if this were so.

So let me move to the heart of the matter: what is correct in this book and what is mistaken? To answer that question, I distinguish four levels: the details, the explanation, the presentation and the philosophical dialogue.

In *Sophie's World* the stories about the philosophers are told with a voice of definite authority and a keen eye for details. When we read a historical novel we accept that the author adds a layer of fictional details on top of the basic structure of historical facts. In both Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (about Napoleon's war in Russia) and in Flaubert's *Salamhho* (about the end of the first Punic war) it happens that a certain person does not sleep well the night before the major episode in the plot. Nobody expects that to be a historical fact which can be documented. But what about *Sophie's World*: are the details part of the fiction or part of the facts? When Gaarder writes, e.g., that Spinoza, after his excommunication from the Jewish community in Amsterdam, earned his living by polishing lenses, should we read this as fact or fiction? Who will decide? Another example: in the chapter on Charles Darwin, Gaarder tells us that Karl Marx asked Darwin for permission to dedicate the English translation of *Das Kapital* to him. Fact or fiction? Gaarder here retells old stories, but for both there is no historical evidence. Does it matter? Not really, I think, but what I miss in the book is even the smallest grain of doubt or hesitation. It is the total absence of an inquiring attitude that I find astonishing. Nowhere Sophie interrupts and asks questions such as "What makes you so sure? Don't you ever make mistakes? How do you distinguish fact from conjecture?"

Enough about the level of detail. What about the explanations of the philosophies: are they correct? That is a more relevant question, but it cannot be answered with a simple Yes or No. First there is the fact that especially in philosophy different authors give different, equally reasonable explanations. Above that, there is the attempt to reduce complex philosophies to popular prose. Nevertheless I dare to say that at quite a few places Gaarder is simply mistaken. A brief selection: Socrates, Spinoza and Darwin.

It is not a part of Socrates' behaviour to pretend he does not know something: "Socrates could feign ignorance - or pretend to be dumber than he was" [p. 51]. But this is not what happens, neither in the Socratic dialogues, nor in using the Socratic method in teaching philosophy; it is exactly the distinction between 'questioning what we know' and 'doing as if we do not know' that makes the difference between success and failure.

Spinoza's 'historico-critical' way of reading the Bible does not mean that we "must continually bear in mind the period it was written in" [p. 191]. 'Historical' does not refer to the time when the text was written, but to the 'history' of the manuscript, i.e., to the question whether the manuscript stems from one textual source or is compiled of several previous texts.

In the chapter on Darwin and neodarwinism it is said [p. 321], although not clearly (the explanation is rather foggy), that the differences between individuals are the result of mutation. That is simply not true; some differences may be due to mutation, but most are not. That my youngest daughter, contrary to her sister, has a darker tan, which makes her skin less vulnerable in the sunshine is not a matter of mutation.

Does it matter? In answering this question I have mixed feelings. In a positive mood I would say: "yes, this does matter, because the mistakes concern crucial elements in the philosophy at stake". But in a more relativistic mood I compare the explanations in the book with the sea waves on the shore: each on its own tries to impress us, but after a few seconds it is washed away by the next one. The same happens in this book: before the reader can get a grasp of what is explained, the eyes are drawn to the next explanation. What does it matter that some of them are less correct? But then, what does the reader learn? What does Sophie learn? I honestly do not know.

Enough about the level of explanation. How about the presentation of the philosophies? Here any author of a book on the history of philosophy has to make a definite decision: do I display the philosophies as the products on the shelf of a grocery store or as the jewels in the showcase at a jewelry? To my regret, Gaarder's novel follows the grocery approach. Reading his presentation of the different philosophies is like reading the contents on the side of the cardboard box: "Spinoza's philosophy contains 1 substance, 2 attributes and numerous modi. It makes you realize that you are fully determined." Next one. "This is John Locke's philosophy. It contains 1 tabula rasa. You can write your own impressions on it." Etc.

The chapter about Spinoza is one of the most tormenting ones. I admit, it is not an easy task to explain his philosophy; there are enough authors of introductory books of philosophy who simply skip his contribution. But at the same time, Spinoza's attempt to think without compromises, to think things through till the utmost consequences, is fascinating and can be presented as a fascinating enterprise. But in this chapter it remains totally unclear what the question is that Spinoza tries to answer. Instead, abstract sentences float around across the pages. The readers feels tempted to skip them and start again where sentences look a little bit more like common sense. Poor Spinoza! But all these flaws I would be willing to take in stride, if the book were good and convincing in its most essential feature: the philosophical dialogues. The history of philosophy is like an ongoing dialogue, with new conjectures and sharp refutations of previous arguments. But this dialogue becomes alive only when one takes time to understand what is meant and to engage oneself in the inter-active play of confronting philosophers with one another around the same question. It is a book about answers, but which questions are answered, that remains unclear. Even worse, Sophie's philosophy teacher considers it to be quite normal that after one of his condensed abstract explanations Sophie simply says: "Oh yes, I think I understand". I find this astonishing. If I were her teacher I would say: "Wait, wait, you can't say that you already understand this; that is simply impossible". Let me quote from the explanation of Sartre's existentialism [p. 350]: "By essence we mean that which something consists of - the nature, or being, of something. But according to Sartre, man has no such innate 'nature'. Man must therefore create himself. He must create his own nature or 'essence', because it is not fixed in advance". "I think I see what you mean," [Sophie says]. But what does he mean? What does Sartre mean? What does it mean to create your own nature? What is Sartre's argument for stating that man has no essence? Or does man have one, but different from the one of the things? There is no time for these questions. The explanation goes on, this time about angst and alienation. Sophie's contribution is as ever: "Yes, I see"!

In some instances Sophie catches a glimpse of the relation between two philosophies. In the chapter on Romanticism, she interrupts her teacher in his explanation about Schelling and says: "Yes, just like Spinoza" [p. 269]. But her teacher, undisturbed as ever (or is he as little interested as the average salesclerk in the local grocery store?), continues his explanation: "Schelling said". When I read this, I see my former students struggling through their first teaching classes, fully dedicated to avoiding didactic mistakes as this one. Hours,

days, weeks we spent to bring philosophical thinking, dialogue and inquiry into the classroom. Sometimes we failed, sometimes we succeeded, but at least we made the effort. In this novel, however, (almost 400 pages long) the reader is tormented by a teacher who cannot stop and does not think.

So in later years, when the readers of *Sophie's World* will enter college, the philosophy teachers there will have to stand up and say: "Wait a moment, those of you who have read that book, don't think that doing philosophy is anything like what happens in that book. What I expect from you is that you engage yourself in the thinking of these philosophers, that you raise critical questions, that you think of counter arguments, and above all, that you investigate your own understanding. If you will do so, I will help you and we will have a true philosophy class." I wish Jostein Gaarder to be a better philosophy teacher himself than the one in his novel.

I deliberately do not refer to the reading experience of young readers at the age of Sophie. I know many of them enjoy the book, and that truly is a value on its own. Most of them find it hard to express why they appreciate the book, but I found two of them willing to write their reader's report for you.

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Sophie's World ...

A reader's report

by Willemijn Noordoven and Linda Matthijssen (age 15)

When Pieter Mostert asked us to write about our reading experience regarding *Sophie's World*, we were enthusiastic right away. But then we could not foresee that it would be quite a task to write about the whole book. Together, the two of us struggled through the book. Not that the book is dull or not good, but mainly because it is so much.

The subtitle of the book is 'A novel about the history of philosophy'. To us it is a history of philosophy, in which a novel is incorporated. The chapters about philosophy are very long, especially in the first half of the book. Therefore we found it hard to catch the main line of the plot. However, we continued our reading of the book, mainly because so much tension is built up in the beginning. This is because there are so many unexpected and - at first sight - incomprehensible events: the letters Sophie receives from a to her unknown philosophy teacher (who is that, Alberto?), the postcards she gets in the strangest manner, the finding of Hilde's belongings (who is Hilde?), the story with the mirror, etc.

In the book the philosophies are explained well. Sometimes they are rather complicated, so we had to read them more than once before we understood them. The first period of the history of philosophy we found easier to understand, because many names and concepts were already familiar to us, as we have had classes in Greek and Latin. The later periods are more difficult, at least for us, as they contain very many philosophical concepts that we were not familiar with. But the author gives concrete examples to clarify the difficult concepts.

All in all, this happens at the expense of the story. Therefore we tended to read the philosophical sections more superficially or were even tempted to skip them, so that we could continue the reading of the story.

In the story the philosophy that has been explained previously plays an interesting role. Especially the use of Berkeley's philosophy is done very well: "Everything is due to that spirit which is the cause of 'everything in everything' and which 'all things consist in'." (p. 219). So what or who does exist really, what or who does not? According to us, this is the main theme of the story; this is the dividing line in the book: what is fantasy and what is real? Who is real: Sophie or Hilde?

We think that *Sophie's World* is a very good, but difficult book. Certainly we will read it again and look thin up when philosophy is dealt with in our Greek and Latin classes.

NOTE FROM PIETER MOSTERT.

Willemijn and Linda live in Wassenaar, near The Hague, the Netherlands. In the Dutch school system, at the age of 14 students opt for one out of three school levels. At the highest level, which enables them to enter university after graduation, part of the Dutch schools offer classes in Greek and Latin. These classes are taught several times a week, during three or four years. Willemijn and Linda attend such a school. In American terminology they would be considered as 'straight A students'.