

Gerrit Mannoury's signific philosophy

Mireille Kirkels (PhD, EUR)

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General background In the first half of the twentieth century, there was an enormous interest in Europe for everything that could improve mutual communication of individuals or groups of individuals. During this time fundamental changes occurred, not only in daily life, but also in science and philosophy. This background of upheaval and radical change in science and society resulted in several so called concept-critical movements in Europe; not only the well-known Vienna Circle around Moritz Schlick (1882-1936) in Austria and analytic philosophy originating in the Cambridge of George E. Moore (1873-1958) and Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), but also the signific movement in The Netherlands, with Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932), L.E.J. (Bertus) Brouwer (1881-1966), Gerrit Mannoury (1867-1956), David van Dantzig (1900-1959) and more or less affiliated with significs, Evert Beth (1908-1964) and Arend Heyting (1898-1980).

What these circles had in common was a great interest in careful analysis of language usage in order to prevent misunderstandings and social problems to arise. These movements form part of a more general critical tendency, which over the years has revealed itself in nearly every domain of culture and of scientific research. In the 1930s, the circles grew into veritable movements and exerted a great influence on the scientific research they accompanied. From criticism in the margin, they acquired the position of prescribing methodology. Teachings in methodology, logic, philosophy of science and language analysis developed in the post-World War II era and continue to the present day. Dutch participants played a major role in bringing several strands of these movements together, e.g. by creating publication channels like the journal "Synthese" (1936). In contrast to the continuing interest in the history of analytic philosophy in other countries, notably the Vienna Circle and British analytic philosophy, the Dutch concept-critical tradition has been understudied.

In the NWO funded research project "From criticism to methodology. Dutch reflections on science and society 1926-1970", we want to bridge this gap in the Dutch and European history of ideas by studying the works of some of the leading persons involved: Gerrit Mannoury (drs. Mireille Kirkels, Faculty of Philosophy, EUR), David van Dantzig (dr. Gerard Alberts, Korteweg de Vries Institute, UvA), Evert Beth and Arend Heyting (dr. Paul van Ulsen, ILLC, UvA).

Gerrit Mannoury's signific philosophy The Dutch philosopher, mathematician and socialist Gerrit Mannoury was a familiar person in Dutch intellectual circles in his time. In his long life he was very actively involved in a variety of scientific, philosophical and social issues. Mannoury started as a nineteenth-century schoolteacher, but, already fifty years old, he became an extraordinary professor in 1917 and a full professor in 1918 in Amsterdam, lecturing in the philosophy of mathematics.

Because of his broad interest and dedication Mannoury wrote many books and articles in the field of e.g. the history and philosophy of mathematics, didactics, Buddhism, significs, the history of philosophy, social democracy, mass psychology, communism and capital punishment. Even after his retirement in 1937 he still published, besides articles, seven books. Apart from the more than 375 publications written by Mannoury there are also a lot of unpublished lectures, letters and notes in several archives.

Despite the fact that Mannoury was an important intellectual with original ideas in the period between roughly 1900 and 1955, he only plays a modest role in the historiography. He is best known for his influence on Brouwer, the founding father of intuitionism. Moreover Mannoury, still being a schoolteacher in mathematics, not only introduced topology in the Netherlands, but he also drew attention to new developments in mathematical logic in his public lecture of 1903. In this lecture he recommends mathematical logic as a useful instrument for philosophy.

Mannoury was not an armchair philosopher. He was driven by a strong social feeling. For that reason he became a member of the Dutch Labour Party in 1900 and secretary of the Social Democratic Study Group in 1901 which was co-founded by him. In 1909 he left the party together with the radical Marxist opposition and joined the Social Democratic Party, later (1918) to become the Dutch Communist party. He was very actively involved in this. Not only was he a board member, but he also held various lectures and he published almost 200 articles in the party journal "De Tribune". In 1929 Mannoury was disbarred by the Communist Party, something he regretted for the rest of his life.

The most important contributions Mannoury made, are in the field of signification. What we should understand exactly by the concept "signification", is not that clear. The various significationists each gave their own interpretation and of course their interpretations of the concept changed over time. Provisionally and generally we could say that signification is a concept-critical theory which aims at enhancing human communication and understanding. In particular, the significationists reacted against the ill-usage of language in philosophy and science, but they were also interested in ordinary and political language.

In the amount of interests, publications and activities that Mannoury developed throughout his life, he himself observes a unity. According to him, his three areas of interest, mathematics, philosophy and socialism, must be considered as a whole. Also striking is the similarity between his earlier and later ideas. But one topic that constantly recurs in various ways in both his mathematical, philosophical and socialist works is "language".

Surprisingly, given the amount of secondary literature on Mannoury and Dutch signification, my dissertation will be the first book length study about him. Many important articles and book chapters about aspects of his work and life appeared, but a coherent and extensive outline of them is still missing. My aim is therefore simple: to give a comprehensive overview of Mannoury's signification philosophy between 1903 and 1953, which includes his three areas of interest: mathematics, philosophy and socialism, thereby embedding his theory in the scientific, cultural and historical context. This project is motivated by my belief that, despite the secondary literature on both Dutch signification and Mannoury, the depth and extent of Mannoury's signification philosophy has not been fully appreciated.