

**An investigation into the development of the European core values
from a comparative philosophical perspective**

"How can you describe the greatness of the ocean to a frog living at the bottom of a well? It will not understand you."¹ With this picture Zhuang Zi presents us a metaphor that shows that our stay in the narrow well of our own cultural paradigm deprives us of the consciousness of the grand cosmic mystery in which we live. Besides, he indicates us the impossibility of communication and sympathy as long as we look from the perspective of our own world view. Once climbed out of the well, staying by the grand ocean, we meet each other. Then we see our own paradigmatic definiteness and that of others and then we realize the restriction of world views in general. This does not need to be a clash of civilizations but can result both in an in-depth meeting and in an enriched world view. To make this possible, Ulrich Libbrecht, professor in Sinology and Comparative Philosophy, developed a model to map the basic headlines of strongly different philosophies and a transparadigmatic model to compare and describe cultures on the basis of equivalency. He emphasizes the characteristics and the differences between them, not in order to put them in conflicting models but to integrate all of them in a more complete world view. Because the whole of cultures is extended and complex, he descends into the depth by means of an active reduction. "Cultures manifest in daily life the deeper forces and so can be described as *surface structures*"² The deep structure bares the 'paradigmata'. These paradigmata are the basic premises that are not critically interrogated and that unconsciously determine thinking, acting and world view. These postulates can be constant in the historical development of cultures and can be already present in the first mythological interpretations. I would like to use Libbrecht's model in my search for European core values, firstly because it gives a clear view of these fundamental values, secondly because the profile of Western thought can be formulated more sharply in contrast with other philosophical traditions.

Libbrecht constructs his comparative model by means of three philosophical (ontological) basic dimensions: becoming³, being and non-being. Obviously they are present in each culture, but in each of them with an other importance. In Chinese Daoism 'becoming' is the fundamental characteristic of the world. The natural universe, which is a spontaneous process of transformation, is the Real Reality. There is nothing outside or above this: no God, no creator. The Daoist would not disturb the spontaneous harmony of nature and highly values authenticity and resonance with the natural flow.

'Non-being' and 'being' are the transcendental dimensions in the model. The immanent 'becoming' also exists without humanity. The cosmic process goes back to the era long before human beings appear. 'Being' and 'non-being' refer to the way in which man transcends natural 'becoming': on the one hand rational, on the other emotional. In the core of many Eastern traditions we see the value of 'non-being': man strive for redemption from the bounds of the natural struggle for life. This is connected with a changed consciousness of reality: illumination or enlightenment. Especially in Buddhism man reaches the insight that we cannot rationally understand the ground of reality (Emptiness) but we can emotionally experience it as a mystery. Thus in Libbrecht's model 'non-being' means the negation of the conceptualization of existence. 'Becoming' can be described in 'being-concepts' or can be felt in 'non-being-experiences'. A 'being-concept' is a result of objectification: we make a thing of it. An experience is not open to objectification, it's (a) no-thing.

In Western thinking 'being' is dominant: natural 'becoming' and emotionality have to be exceeded by rationality, both in meta-physics and in physical sciences and technology. The aim and the value of Western thought lie in the rationalization of the world by obtaining insight in its structure and by developing a technology by means of which man can master nature to an ever greater extent and become less dependent of it. The value lies in the transcendental dimension of life: in knowledge and comfort. The prototype of this is

the city, which is a transcendent, seemingly manageable world of 'being' in the dynamic unmanageable world of 'becoming'. Contemporary living is too often serving the artificial world of money, stock market and linear clock time. The newest world of being is the virtual world of Internet and television in which humans can create their own world and in which communication takes place without the presence of a warm, sensitive body. When we watch the busy modern man, it seems that he has reconciled himself with the fundamentally changeable character of reality. Nevertheless, he only seems partially reconciled with the rhythm of becoming. Becoming not only implies arising and growing up, but also decline and death. In modern culture man no longer tries to exceed the world of becoming by the belief in 'unchangeable beings' like God, heaven and soul, but by oppressing the natural rhythms and by disregarding the recessive aspects of the natural process. Obsessed by a belief in linear time and future, we forget that nothing can grow continually, neither in our own life nor in the world of economics and culture. Moreover, waste is pushed away deep in the ocean; death, old age and sickness are isolated and withdrawn from our sight; everybody has to look young and active. The values are borrowed from the summer. But "How can you explain the beauty of snow and ice to an insect living only during the summer? It will not understand you."⁴ said Zhuang Zi, thereby pointing out the richness of the natural rhythms. The European culture is not reconciled with 'the innocence of becoming' (Nietzsche) and because of this it puts up a hopeless fight against a fundamental characteristic of our existence, namely that nothing is permanent.

Let's look at the roots of this Western way of thinking in a historical-philosophical way.

In the global Western world view we can distinguish three influences: the ancient Greek philosophy, the Christian religion and the Enlightenment, resulting in experimental science. In the beginning of Greek philosophy we see two traces of thinking: Heracleitos, who said that everything is moving (becoming) and Parmenides, who believed in an unchangeable logical structure of being. If philosophy had chosen for the theory of Heracleitos, western thought would have developed in the direction of traditional Chinese thinking where the world consists fundamentally of *ch'i* (energy), which is omnipresent. However, Western thought initially developed in the other direction, in the preoccupation to find the unchanging permanency in reality. Contrary to the visibly mutable character of the developing world, western philosophers created theories about immutable and everlasting elements in the universe, as can be illustrated by the theories of elementary particles developed by Empedocles, Aristotle and the atomists, and by Plato's *Ideas*. Christianity built its main conceptions on Plato's theory: the soul is the permanent eternal principle in man that lives on after death in eternal heaven; God is the immutable, permanent principle of the world. Because of this, a fundamental dualism arose between the permanent (being) and the impermanent (becoming). Permanency seemed to be perfect, while impermanency seemed to indicate imperfection. This created a hierarchic structure: the changeable aspects like nature, body, life on earth, were inferior to God, soul, hereafter in heaven. Experience and emotions were inferior to (rational or holy) ideas that are fixed in theories and written words. Socrates said: "I am a lover of learning, and trees and open country will not teach me anything; whereas men in the city do."⁵ This is completely the opposite of what is written in ancient China: "Those who, throughout the ages, taught people how to treat the water did not learn this from Yü the Great, they learnt it from the water."⁶ In ancient Western times the metaphysical 'being-concepts' were regarded as the truth whereas the variable earthly life was seen as a derived truth.

From the Enlightenment in the 18th century onwards, experimental science turned the matter upside down, convinced that the truth had to be found in reality itself. The data obtained through observation and experimentation in the world of becoming, are classified in rational, logically consistent models. The dynamic emerging world has to be fixed into binary causalities, elementary particles, force fields, etc. On the one hand these provide an accurate picture of true reality, on the other hand they reduce reality to whatever can be grasped in logical structures. "We are being-reductionists"⁷ says Libbrecht. We can observe this for example in Western medical science which has developed into an objective discipline that very well restores the mechanical function of the body but usually fails to make people feel better inside. The diagnosis is based on informative images: anatomical drawings, X-rays and scanner images, figures of biochemical analysis, etc. These are fragmentary images of reality which fail to cover the whole of reality itself. The inner experience of the body, the emotional interaction with the environment or even the holistic functioning within the body itself cannot be scientifically objectified or measured and therefore have to be excluded as a source of information. However, both the image produced by the scanner and the invisible sense of -for example- listlessness are the truth. Or does the Hegelian adage "the rational is the real and the real is the rational"⁸ remain our experience of reality and is conceptualization to be regarded as the highest value?

This brings us to the fundamental distinction between two visions of life. Libbrecht assumes that in the deep

structure there are two possible visions. Either your premiss is the intelligibility of the universe; you believe that one day everything will be known. This is the vision of rationalism. Or you can assume that, despite all rational knowledge, there will always be a fundamental mystery in reality. When you are emotionally moved by this mystery without wanting to grasp or understand it, you are a mystic. According to Libbrecht, this mystical experience is the deep structure of every religion and the core of all forms of 'non-being-thought'.

The religion that has determined the European culture, is Christianity. Although Christianity has had its own mystics like Ruusbroec and Eckhart, it has always marginalised them and -as is the case for Eckhart- even condemned them. Does this imply that Christianity has adapted a kind of 'being-thought'? Does Christianity set a high value on what can be conceptualized, in texts, laws, rituals and theology?

First, Christianity is an anthropocentric 'anti-becoming-thought'. Nature is not sacrally loaded. Places on earth are not holy by themselves, they have to be sanctified by human consecration. God is outside the world. Nature is his creation; man has nature at his disposal (Genesis 1:26, 2:15). The beauty of nature is at best the mirror of the divine. If we radically elaborate on this idea, God will remain upright even if we destroy or damage the mirror. This would not be the case if God were nature itself, as Spinoza says: 'Deus sive Natura.'. Then nature itself would be the highest, divine value. This form of piety or fundamental respect for the natural 'becoming' has always failed in European religion and has possibly contributed to the ecological problems, like Lynn White⁹ claims. When we approach nature purely rationally and economically, we will never be concerned about it with our heart. Probably ecology will only be genuine and sustainable when we are deeply emotionally touched by the wonder that is fundamentally taking place in nature, regardless of man.

The aspect of personal experience has never been promoted by Christianity. The ultimate authority lies in the written word of Scripture, in written laws and in the hierarchical power structure of the Church with -in catholicism- an infallible Pope at its head. These are all examples of conceptualization, that can be separate from authentic experience.

The main value Christianity gave to Europe is charity. Love of one's neighbour is an emotion and cannot be objectified. Love has no structure that can be observed, one can only infer its presence from its operations. Therefore Libbrecht calls 'non-being-experiences' 'fields', similar to a magnetic field that you can't see but whose effects can be deduced from the movements of the magnetic needle. Emotion implies being moved, either towards yourself (ego-intentional), or towards other things, other beings or the mystery himself (alter-intentional). In this way Libbrecht distinguishes in his model immanent and transcendent emotions. Charity is a transcendent emotion. The question is whether Christian charity has been developed in European culture as an authentic experience or as a rational principle. Anyway it has led to a legalistic structure based on the value of equality and social justice. So most European countries have a valuable social security system and they base themselves on the Universal declaration of Human Rights. The principle of equality is only possible through an abstraction of reality. In the natural reality, no two people are equal. 'Man' does not exist, except in the concepts of our consciousness. The 'social contract', modern democracy and European legislation are based on Locke's premise as described in his "Second Treatise of Government": "All men are naturally free, equal and independent."¹⁰ Is this so, naturally? When we look at the natural 'becoming-world' we see that it is dominated by a reticular causality in which everything is interdependent. Do I exist independent of my mother who bore me and took care of me, independent of the food cultivated and transported by others, independent of the sun in whose force field I live? Is the 'principium individuationis' based on reality or is it a typical Western individualistic ideal? Isn't it an illusion that we are autonomous subjects? Can we cut the waves from the ocean? Scientific research requires that it is necessary to split up reality into autonomous objects and subjects; the subject should keep at a critical distance from the object that is to be examined. The question is, however, if we can cut ourselves from the world. Can we stand outside the cosmos, except in a transcendental 'being-structure'?

In his book "Open Mind" Edel Maex writes: ethics "is about not causing suffering in a world where everything is connected"¹¹. Ethical behavior is more than the application of laws and regulations, it is a open sensitivity to the impact that my actions have. This network effect has no boundaries and extends to the whole world population and the universe. How ethical is behavior dictated by law and enforced by fear of punishment but not arisen from the heart itself? In "The meaning of Eastern philosophy for the West" Libbrecht writes: "It is empathy for those who suffer that indicates the way in which we act, not some ethical code. But because our emotionality is ego-intentional on the immanent level, it needs to be educated to

develop in an alter-intentional way.”¹² When man lives in a transcendent world, he is largely free from natural constraints. However, when his emotionality is still limited to the immanent ego-directed level, his egoism becomes boundless and will finally suffocate the earth. Rational transcendence must be balanced by emotional transcendence. Rational Enlightenment came from European 'being-thinking', emotional enlightenment already exists for a long time in the Eastern 'non-being-thinking'. Let us hope that the latter will be equally distributed across the world.

To conclude, Zhuang Zi says: "How can you explain the mystery of existence to a narrow-minded scholar? He will not understand you"¹³. I hope that the gap between thinking and non-thinking can be bridged and that a non-dualistic attitude can grow in the world. Our world is in a phase of liberation. May this lead to an open mind and an open heart that exceeds our anthropocentrism and that places us again in the overwhelming 'becoming-wonder' of the cosmos. “The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”¹⁴

- ¹ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzŭ*, 1968, p.175
- ² Ulrich Libbrecht, *Within the Four Seas...Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, p.76
- ³ I've used the terms like Ulrich Libbrecht used them in his English translation.
- ⁴ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzŭ*, 1968, p.175
- ⁵ Plato, *Phaedro* 230d. E. Hamilton, *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, 1963 rep., p. 479
- ⁶ Cited in Ulrich Libbrecht, *Within the Four Seas...Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, p.78 (Kuo-yü, p.11b)
- ⁷ Ulrich Libbrecht, *Within the Four Seas...Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, p.578
- ⁸ Cited in Ulrich Libbrecht, *Within the Four Seas...Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, p.158
- ⁹ Lynn White, "The historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", *Nature*, 155 (March 1967), pp. 1203-1207
- ¹ ⁰ cited in Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Dissability, Nationality, Species Membership*, 2005, Dutch translation p. 21
- ¹ ¹ Edel Maex, *Open Mind*, 2009, p. 79
- ¹ ² Ulrich Libbrecht, *Within the Four Seas...Introduction of Comparative Philosophy*, 2007, p.545
- ¹ ³ Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzŭ*, 1968, p.175
- ¹ ⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker II vs. 97-98