

Knowledge and Auctoritas in Coornhert's *Zedekunst*

Julie Rogiest (Ghent University)

Introduction

In 1586, one of the most important works of the Dutch philosopher Dirck Coornhert, *Zedekunst dat is wellevenskunste* or *The art of the virtuous life*,¹ was first published². This work was the first systematized form of ethics ever to have been written in the Dutch language. Apart from that, the text also provides us with a full overview of the philosophical and moral program of its writer. This program, which earned Coornhert the title of « the sixteenth century champion of moral perfectionism »³, can be rendered by three important lines of thought that also make out the core of the rest of his impressive oeuvre:⁴ moral perfectibility⁵, the search for Truth and moderation in all things “human”⁶.

As I hope to show, the right sort of knowledge plays a central part in Coornhert's perfectibilist project, and this mostly with regard to the good management of the human emotions or “hartstochten”, which necessarily underlies the virtuous life or “welleven”. Since this article

¹ HANS and SIMONE MOOIJ-VALK have translated it more literally by “Ethics or the Art of living well”, cf. “Coornhert on virtue and nobility”, in: *Christian Humanism* (ed. A. A. MacDonald e.a.), Leiden, Koninklijke Brill, 2009, 157.

² More information can be found on the site of the Coornhert foundation: <http://www.coornhertstichting.nl/Coornhert/>. I have chosen to work with the 1586 *edition princeps* annotated by the Russian Coornhert specialist Bruno Becker.

³ The expression belongs to Bruno Becker. Cf. HENK BONGER (red.), *Op zoek naar het hoogste goed*, 133-159; which contains the reprint of Becker's famous article ‘Coornhert, de zestiende-eeuwse apostel der volmaakbaarheid’, first published in: *Nederlands archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 19, 1926, 59-84.

⁴ Coornhert's philosophy shows great coherence, as appears from the comparison of the *Zedekunst* with his former shorter texts on virtue. Cf. RUBEN BUYS, *Coornhert in het klein. Korte teksten over deugd, onwetendheid en volmaakbaarheid*, Amsterdam, AUP, 2011.

⁵ As Coornhert literally states in the *Zedekunst*, he holds the actual realisation of the virtuous life impossible. See ZK IV, III. 12. Coornhert does want his readers to become god-like, to yet again become the *imago Dei* they were originally created to be before the Fall; but he refutes the possibility of achieving divine perfection. I therefore prefer the term « perfectibility » over that of « perfectionism », for it renders the prevalence of the idea of this (im)possibility better.

⁶ Love, for example, is beyond moderation because it connects us with the divine and makes us god-like, cf. ZK I, VII. 15.

aims to probe not only the importance, but also the specificity of the role that knowledge plays within the general framework of the *Zedekunst*, I consider it useful to start by examining which intellectual authorities Coornhert uses to construe and to defend his program of moral self-individuation, as well as how he himself legitimizes them. In order to do that, I will also refer to other texts written by Coornhert, such as the first part of the *Synode over de gewetensvrijheid*⁷ (1582) and the first part of his *Proces van 't ketter-dooden*⁸ (1590), in which he inserted some of his correspondence with Lipsius. The explicitly polemical outset of these texts encouraged Coornhert to express his opinion on the use of authorities in general, that is to say, authorities biblical, patristic and classical. This is in a very conspicuous way far less the case in the *Zedekunst*, for in spite of this ethic's occasionally controversial character, Coornhert wrote to put a hold on rather than to start a dispute of any kind. The second part of my contribution will further deepen the relation between Coornhert's handling of *auctoritas* and the aim of his ethical project by examining his theory on knowledge as it appears from the *Zedekunst*'s fifth chapter of the second book, entitled « Vande kennisse ende wetenschap », as well as from the dedication or “Toe-eyghen brief” to this work.

Before continuing, I want to make clear from the outset that the purpose of my contribution does not lie in locating each and every author Coornhert uses, whether implicitly or not. It would require a whole separate project to do so. Although we have at our disposal the dissertation by van der Meer on the classical elements in the *Zedekunst*,⁹ a lot of gaps still need to be filled. For example, an overview study, including not only all the classical but also the medieval and contemporary sources for the *Zedekunst*, does not exist. Yet, given the specific text-strategies used by Coornhert, it seems to me that this task of filing his sources might never be concluded.

⁷ Its original title is *Synodus. Van der conscientien vryheydt*.

⁸ Both works are available in the digital library of the Coornhert foundation.

⁹ SUFFRIDUS VAN DER MEER, *Bijdrage tot het onderzoek naar klassieke elementen in Coornhert's Wellevenskunste*, Amsterdam, gebr. Huisman en Hanenburg, 1934.

I. Coornhert and auctoritas.

The pagan classics

The first kind of knowledge Coornhert makes use of in the *Zedekunst* is provided by the pagan classical philosophers. The most important among them are, in chronological order: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca¹⁰. Throughout the entire *Zedekunst*, Coornhert makes use of the ideas and sayings of these thinkers from different philosophical backgrounds, thereto indistinctly adding the thoughts of (early) Christian thinkers such as Boëthius and Thomas Aquinas, together with contemporary authors like Cornelius Valerius and Sebastianus Foxius Morzillus¹¹. In this blending, Coornhert is no different from his colleagues: abundant intellectual borrowing was, in fact, customary among the humanists. It is far more significant that Coornhert rarely if ever mentions the name of these philosophers he draws upon:

» Dat Coornhert slechts zelden een profaan wijsgeer met name noemt, zooals Zijderveld verder opmerkt, is juist: hij noemt alleen SENECA (IV.10.5). Doch zonder namen te noemen verwijst hij op verscheidene plaatsen naar oude wijsgeeren, bv.: *een wys mensche* (I.12.9), *de verstandighste vande Ouden* (III. 1.10), *eenige vande gheleerdste OUDen* (V.7.12), *de wyze man, in zyn zelfs ooghen onwys* (V. 7.53), *veel vanden wyzen Ouden* (VI.3.18).«¹²

Coornhert mostly quotes in a separate paragraph the texts of the more “literary” authors such as Ovid and Horace – without mentioning their names, however. Quoting Ovid, Coornhert only says that he is translating an “ouden” (i.e. an ancient thinker), and he only once mentions by name the “Poëet bij uitstek” Horace. Coornhert only refers to the names of important historical figures such as the ancient kings Agesilaüs, Philip II of Macedon, Alexander the Great and Darius – the latter mainly in his chapter on friendship. Some philosopher’s sayings are also explicitly quoted – Socrates’ famous “all I know is that I know nothing”¹³ and his self-defence against Melite, or the philosopher Xenocrates in defending his friend Plato against the tyrant Dionysius – but like the former, these examples always take the form of historical facts or legends, never of textual citations introduced by the thinker’s name.

¹⁰ See VAN DER MEER (v. fn. 9).

¹¹ Cf. GERRIT KUIPER, *Orbis artium en renaissance I. Cornelius Valerius en Sebastianus Foxius Morzillus als bronnen van Coornhert*, Harderwijk, Flevo, 1941.

¹² VAN DER MEER (v. fn. 9), 164-165.

¹³ ZK VI, IX. 11.

It is also worth noting that Coornhert uses the intellectual legacy of his predecessors on several levels: first, on a “textual” level, either literally translating or paraphrasing the author in question¹⁴. Secondly, on an “intratextual” level, in allowing these authors to provide the philosophical undercurrents of his philosophy. And thirdly, on an “supratextual” level, in re-using the textual organisation of some works or parts of works he has read¹⁵. Quite often also, one author is used on several levels at once.

Obviously, Coornhert’s particular treatment of his intellectual sources – *i.e.* the anonymous patchwork he constructs on the basis of their writings - might put the modern reader with his distanced view on the history of philosophy under the impression that he is dealing with someone who can be qualified as an “eclectic thinker”¹⁶. However, as stated in *The Reformed thought on freedom*, this would be a fairly unhistorical way of thinking which mixes up our own modern reading and writing practices with those of the early-modern author¹⁷.

Coornhert’s particular way of using his sources pertains to the three compatible causes explained below.

To assume that Coornhert only unconsciously re-used in the *Zedekunst* several thoughts and expressions he had encountered throughout his personal readings would oversimplify matters. Firstly, mentioning the name of his *auctoritates* would contradict the very essence of the ethical ideal he wants to propagate. Of course, Coornhert does essentially write for a not classically educated public he can’t risk to frighten off with name-juggling of any sort (*cf. infra*). He knows that his message of moral conversion will pass far more easily if he doesn’t try to dazzle his readers with names of authors and notes on philosophical schools they scarcely heard of. But far more importantly, we need to understand that the very foundation of Coornhert’s ideal of the virtuous life lies in the reader’s ability to internalize the ethical norms the *Zedekunst* sets out. Since the purpose of Coornhert’s ethic is to form self-regulating individuals, emphasizing the fact that the moral standards are mainly drawn from outside

¹⁴ See also VAN DER MEER (v. fn. 9).

¹⁵ Van der Meer claims that Coornhert used the first book of the Ciceronian *Offices* for the general structure of the *Zedekunst*. Kuiper qualifies this statement in noting that the works of Valerius and Foxius also helped structure the *Zedekunst*.

¹⁶ See for example RUBEN BUYS, *De kunst van het weldenken. Lekenfilosofie en volkstalig rationalisme in de Nederlanden (1550-1600)*, Amsterdam, AUP, 2009, S. 203: “Zo bladeren de weldenkers eclecticisch door het antieke verleden op zoek naar beelden, argumenten en ideeën die hun geloof in de menselijke waardigheid en de mogelijkheid van morele verbetering kunnen ondersteunen”.

¹⁷ *The Reformed thought on freedom. The Concept of free choice in early modern reformed theology* (ed. WILLEM J. VAN ASSELT *e.a.*), Michigan, Baker Academic (coll. Texts & studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation thought), 2010, 25-26.

Coornhert's personal experience would thwart his whole project. As will be shown, Coornhert considers moral theory to be useless, even "dead" knowledge if it is not put into practice. At the same time, however, Coornhert needs to avoid the personal anecdote: the moral knowledge he provides need always be of a general character, so that it reflects his idea of a natural law functioning as the kernel for the virtuous life (cf. infra), a law which makes it possible for everyone to become virtuous.

What is important to Coornhert, as it should be to his readers, is the message in itself, not the messenger. The idea recalls an important passage of the first book of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, of which Coornhert made two translations, one in 1557¹⁸ and one in 1585, one year before publishing the *Zedekunst*. In this passage, Boethius complains to Lady Philosophy about the loss of all his goods, including his beautiful library. The reply of Lady Philosophy shows the importance of the message as it stands in itself:

» What most moves me, then, is not the look of this place but your own sorry appearance. I don't need a library with comfortable chairs, ivory gewgaws, and big glass windows, but rather the workroom of your mind, for it isn't the books that are important but the ideas in them, the opinions and principles of time gone by, which is what gives the books their value.«¹⁹

Secondly, the impression that Coornhert has randomly sewn together these quotations into a kind of philosophical patchwork must be nuanced on grounds of the combination of text practices specific to humanist thinkers with those particular to scholastic thinkers. As mentioned earlier, it is an established fact in Renaissance studies that humanists freely borrowed from others authors, especially the classics. In this prospect, Coornhert's *Zedekunst* seems to be of no exception. Furthermore, in borrowing from his sources, Coornhert reveals himself to be also a typical exponent of what is called the scholastic text method of "reverent exposition". This reveals to be a plausible explanation, as Coornhert's allegiance to scholastic thinking (especially Aquinas) has already been demonstrated by Dekker and it also becomes obvious in the *Zedekunst*²⁰. The study on the reformed thought on freedom to which I referred earlier, states that

¹⁸ See THEO HERMANS (ed.), *Door eenen engen hals. Nederlandse beschouwingen over vertalen 1550-1670*, Den Haag, Stichting Bibliographia Neerlandica, 1996, 61.

¹⁹ BOETHIUS, *The Consolation of philosophy* (translated by DAVID R. SLAVITT), Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2008, 21.

²⁰ As in scholastic reasoning, Coornhert's theological argumentation often divides itself in four parts: the *quaestio*, *status quaestionis*, *objectiones* and *responsio*. An example can be

» this method of reverent exposition involves a hermeneutical procedure which went back to the patristic period. Until the breakdown of scholasticism and the historical revolution (both in the medieval period and, consequently, in the Reformation and post-Reformation period) an authority, be it the Bible, Aristotle, Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, was not quoted in a historical way, trying to understand historically what its original author had meant, but was primarily read systematically, and so was easily incorporated in the conceptual framework of the writer by whom they were quoted.«²¹

The Bible

As I indicated earlier, Coornhert prominently uses pagan sources to support his program of moral perfectibility. This is all the more interesting because, in contrast with his other works, Coornhert also doesn't explicitly quote the Scripture. This is the case in the whole of the *Zedekunst*. The absence of biblical references has puzzled some of the specialists in the field of Coornhert studies, especially since Coornhert wrote the following in his dedication to the *Zedekunst*:

» Want het my gheen grote moeyten ghevalen zoude zyn, al tghene hier bewezen is met Redene, oock te bevestighen mette H. schrifture. Dit waar oock al gheschiet, ten waar dan dat icx om zonderlinghe [*bijzondere*] oorzaken met voorraad [*opzet*] hadde ghelaten.«²²

For a long time, the “special circumstances” Coornhert referred to, have been interpreted in the sense of purely external, that is to say, political factors: in fact, it was the Russian Coornhert specialist Bruno Becker who created the received view by which Coornhert would have only avoided biblical references because of a ban inflicted upon him. As Becker states, between 1586-1587, the authorities would have strictly forbidden Coornhert to publish anything in relation to the religious debate in order to avoid political commotion. This explanation appears to be the most plausible to Becker, because he said Coornhert to have published the *Zedekunst* anonymously²³, and to have written it on request by his friend

found in ZK I, IV, where Coornhert defends his idea of perfectibility against his protestant opponents Calvin, Beza and the preachers from Delft.

²¹ *Reformed thought on freedom* (v. fn. 17), 25.

²² Toe-eyghen brief, 5.

²³ Becker also adds the following in his introduction to his annotated version of the *Zedekunst*, XIV: “Although the *Wellevenskunste* was published anonymously, Coornhert's humanist acquaintances (Jan van Hout, Justus Lipsius, Prof. Corn. de Groot e.a.) must have easily guessed its author's name. As a matter of fact, the dedication (Toe-eyghen brief) to Spiegel

Hendrik Spiegel, who had explicitly asked him to resort only to Reason and not to the Bible²⁴.

In my view, Becker's theory is not completely satisfactory, since Coornhert still explicitly refutes the idea of predestination in the *Zedekunst*, whereby – albeit without mentioning their names – he obviously lashes out against Calvin, Beza and the preachers from Delft. In this sense, the *Zedekunst* unmistakably shows a controversial character, even though it doesn't form its primary goal: Coornhert didn't want to publish a “kyf-boeck”, as he writes himself²⁵. But he also wasn't one to avoid conflict altogether if he thought he was right. I therefore agree with Gerlof Verwey that the explanation for the absence of the biblical text in the *Zedekunst* doesn't lie in external or political factors alone²⁶.

Verwey is right in stating that the Bible, divine grace²⁷ and scholastic reasoning play a very important role in the *Zedekunst*. The Scripture runs through the whole *Zedekunst*, but only on an intratextual level: the text shows no explicit Bible quotations. This phenomenon can yet again be explained on grounds of the ethical project Coornhert wants to carry out, for stressing the fact that the *Zedekunst*'s moral values are principally drawn from the Bible would yet again divert the reader's attention away from the true goal of Coornhert's ethical program: that of self-regulation steered by self-contemplation, that – as will be explained in the second part of my contribution - of a theoretical form of knowledge to be perfected in everyday practice. Furthermore, the overall absence of a general theoretical reflection on *auctoritas* in the *Zedekunst* is a second indication as to why Coornhert avoided the explicit use of the Scripture to support his arguments. In fact, I believe that Coornhert didn't want the *Zedekunst* to be received like any of the religious pamphlets of his time, since he himself thought these “kyf-boecken”²⁸ led their readers away from God and Truth. To my opinion, Coornhert knew that any explicit reflection on his *auctoritates* – be it biblical or pagan – would have made more tangible the sometimes voluntary, sometimes involuntary controversial character of his work and cast a doubt on the value of his ethical project. Since

was signed by Thiroplusios Laoskardi, a Greek rendering of Dieryck Volckharts ». [my translation]

²⁴ Cf. ZK, xv.

²⁵ Toe-eyghen brief, 1.

²⁶ See GERLOF VERWEY, “Was de ratio van Coornherts argumentatieve theorie in *Zedekunst* (1586) thomistisch van oorsprong?”, in: *D.V. Coornhert (1522-1590): polemist en vredezoeker. Bijdragen tot plaatsbepaling en herwaardering*, Amsterdam, AUP, 2010, 141-171.

²⁷ See ZK III, I. 21-22.

²⁸ Toe-eyghen brief, 1.

Coornhert aimed to offer ethical guidance that exceeded the religious differences of his time (*cf. infra*), he surely would have wanted to avoid this kind of negative attention because it could hamper the transfer of knowledge necessary to his project of moral conversion.

Where pagan meets Christian: the importance of natural law

Apart from the Bible, it is clear that Coornhert also often resorts to ancient thinkers, and he does so especially in the first book of the *Zedekunst*, that is centred around the human emotions, a topic many pagan philosophers wrote about. Two compatible explanations come to mind. First, the simple fact that the theorisation on human emotions forms a long tradition which started in early Antiquity. This makes it quite logical for a writer, especially a Renaissance writer like Coornhert to draw upon these sources. Secondly and most importantly, in the *Zedekunst* Coornhert implicitly legitimizes his classical authorities on grounds of their compatibility with the Christian thinkers. The link between them lies in the principle of “natural law”, the inner virtue each and every man is bestowed with upon birth. This principle is central to the perfectibilist project of the *Zedekunst*, as it will also appear from the following analysis of the second book’s fifth chapter (ZK II, V. 11).

As Becker states, Coornhert gives several meanings to the principle of “natural law”. Sometimes he conceives of it as a modern law of physics, saying that “death is a manifestation of natural law”, or he uses it to refer to our natural instincts. However, in most cases Coornhert understands the principle of natural law as a moral codex written in each and every one of us since the dawn of man. This moral codex takes part in the divine grace for it is a gift we receive from God, just as the servants in the biblical “parable of the talents” (Matthew 25: 14-30). This gift forms the seed out of which our virtue can spring and grow. The *Zedekunst* is written to help its readers rediscover that gift, and again this is why Coornhert must avoid the personal anecdote.

In the first book, Coornhert describes the natural law as “ghezond verstand”²⁹ or “common sense”, but mostly he refers to it as the philosophical-religious principle of the golden rule or ethic of reciprocity :

» Ick meyne datmen een ander doe, zo men ghaarne zoude willen dat ons geschiede. Dit ghoed ende ware kennisse en behoefmen niet in duystere boeken, maar inde angheboren

²⁹ ZK I, XVI, 21.

moghelyckheyd vander naturen wet te zoeken. Daar maght elck licht vinden ende verstaan.«
(ZK I, X. 51)

In brief, Coornhert legitimizes the pagan classics by stating that, on the anthropological grounds of natural law, they too had the possibility to lead a truly virtuous life. In this possibility, they are equal to the Christian thinkers; as Coornhert under the pseudonym of Gamaliël explains in the 7th session of the *Synodus* he published 4 years before the *Zedekunst*:

» Heel veel mensen menen met Zwingli en de inwoners van Zürich dat ook de vrome heidenen ware kennis van God hebben gehad. Ook Paulus staat niet vreemd tegenover deze opvatting. Evenmin is het vreemd dat enkelen van die heidenen zalig zijn geworden, niet zonder, maar door Christus, die de Waarheid zelf is, omdat zij, zoals Paulus zegt, hem als kracht in zich hebben gehad al kenden zij Christus' naam niet. Deze mensen betaamt het nog enigszins dat zij hun betoog staven met spreuken en voorbeelden van heidenen.«³⁰

As I see it, the biggest advantage of the natural law-principle lies in the possibility of offering an ethical alternative: this alternative opens the possibility of dialogue beyond any of the religious differences of Coornhert's time, differences which for a great deal had to do with disputes in Biblical interpretation³¹. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that - as stated by Verwey - the concept of natural law in Coornhert most likely refers to the principle of natural reason in the *Summa contra gentiles* written by Thomas Aquinas³².

But even if the pagan thinkers all had the possibility of the virtuous life, they didn't all "actualize" this possibility³³: therefore Coornhert chooses to use only the writings of the truly virtuous among them, only the writings that are in accordance with Scripture³⁴. The idea of re-using the pagan authors who accord with the Scripture is already in itself a Biblical thought, since it recalls the passages of the "spoliatio Aegyptorum" of Exodus 3 and 12³⁵, passages

³⁰ DIRK VOLCKERTSZOON COORNHERT, *Synode over gewetensvrijheid. Een nauwgezet onderzoek in de vergadering gehouden in het jaar 1582 te Vrijburgh* (red. JAAP GRUPPELAAR e.a.), Amsterdam, AUP, 2008, 83-84.

³¹ See « Brieven-boeck, inhoudende honderdt brieven van D.V. Coornhert », in: *Wercken III*, Amsterdam, Jacob Aertsz., 1630, 296: "Alle geschille in Religions-saecken is om die waerheydt vande heylighe schrift ofde vande uytlegginghe van dien."

³² In this book, in English *The Book on the Truth of the Catholic faith against the Errors of the Infidels*, natural reason establishes the common ground for dialogue with the Muslims Aquinas was asked to convert by one of his fellow Dominicans, Raymond of Penyafort. See VERWEY (v. fn. 26), 161.

³³ The expression is deliberately Aristotelian.

³⁴ Coornhert holds the same idea on the church fathers : see COORNHERT (v. fn. 30), 59.

³⁵ See KATHY EDEN, *Friends hold all things in common. Tradition, Intellectual Property, and the Adages of Erasmus*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001. Cf. also JÜRGEN PIETERS & CHRISTOPHE VAN DER VORST, « Cui dono lepidum novum libellum? Van editiewetenschap

Coornhert also refers to in his *Vande oorsaecke vande Zonde*, 'tgetuygh Platonis³⁶ and that he also might have known from Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*³⁷. More plausible, however, it seems to me that Coornhert knew this theme through the *Antibarbari* of Erasmus, whose work he admired³⁸. As shown by Becker³⁹, most of the *Zedekunst*'s classical quotations are taken from Erasmus' *Apophthegmata*⁴⁰.

One clear example to illustrate Coornhert's view on the correct use of intellectual authorities can be found in the correspondence with Lipsius he inserted in the first part of "Proces van't ketterdooden". Throughout these letters, Coornhert blames Lipsius for the bad use he makes of pagan authors and the Church fathers. According to him, Lipsius didn't use them according to the Scripture to promote virtue and peace. Lipsius only used them in a purely rhetorical way to try and trick people into believing his arguments on the persecution of heretics:

» Dese uwe raet dan ende gheboden en komen niet uyt Gode, ende oock niet uyt de Goddelijcke reden inden mensche ('twelck het derde lidt was) maer uyt u, uyt den Heydenen ende Vaderen dat menschen zijn, die niet te ghebieden en hebben buyten de Goddelijcke Schrift, daer u raet plat jeghen is, oock teghen de rechte redenen, so nu doorgaens is ghebleecken: Ende hoort by noemant aenghenomen, maer by elck verstooten te werden, niet alleen als ydel ende onnut, maer schadelijck ende verderffelijck voor de Landzaten ende Landen.«⁴¹

naar traditiewetenschap: Huygens' Ooghentroost door een nieuwe bril », in : *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 14,1, 2009, S. 66.

³⁶ Year unknown. The passage is available in modern day translation, see BUYS (v. fn. 4), 34.

³⁷ In the Bible, Augustine and Erasmus, also comes forth the idea that Christian thinkers can make far much better use out of these pagan ideas.

³⁸ BUYS (v. fn. 16), 32.

³⁹ *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche letterkunde te Leiden (1939-40)*, Leiden, Brill, 1940, 84-86.

⁴⁰ Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris, Albin Michel (coll. Bibliothèque de l'Évolution de l'Humanité), 2002, 87: "Les apophthegmes sont des paroles célèbres des Anciens, des Pères du désert, prononcées dans une circonstance déterminée. Ce genre littéraire existait aussi dans la tradition philosophique [aside from monastic tradition]: on en trouve de nombreux exemples dans l'œuvre de Diogène Laërce."

⁴¹ COORNHERT, « Proces van't ketter-dooden, ende dwangh der conscientien. Het eerste deel politijck. », in : *Wercken II*, Amsterdam, Jacob Aertsz., 1630, 127.

II. Learning the art of living well: of knowledge and Truth in the *Zedekunst*

“Vande kennisse ende wetenschap”

As the introductory lines of Coornhert’s somewhat confusing chapter on knowledge and truth tell us, the author primarily wrote the *Zedekunst* for a public of “leerghierighen ongheleerden” (ZK II, V. 2). In this context, the expression is to be interpreted in a quite literal sense, referring to the emancipated and inquiring minded burgher – like Coornhert⁴² - who hasn’t received a thorough classical education. In a broader sense, however, the expression seems to incorporate even those “witty scholars” or “scherpzinnighen gheleerden” (ZK I, V. 2) who Coornhert regards as their opposite. This is not only the case in the given chapter on knowledge, but also in Coornhert’s dedication to the *Zedekunst*, in which he already puts centre-stage the importance of the right sort of knowledge for a virtuous life:

» Waert dan niet wel eens tyd, dat niemand en bestond [*begint*] te beschryden d'alderhoogste trappen vande lere, voor ende al eer hy d'alderonderste trappen eerst schickelyck [*regelmatig*] voor-voets-op betreden hadde? Dat niemand zich vergheefs thoofd en brake om te leren lezen, zo langhe hy de letteren of a.b.c. noch niet wel gheleert en hadde? Deze nederste trappen ende a.b.c. zyn de ware ende ondervindlycke kennissen van onze eyghen ghebreken, van onze eyghen wandel ende van ons eyghen quaadheyd, dat is van ons zelve. Ist niet een loutere zotheyd, dat wy wanen d'onghemeten Godheyd met zyne godlycke verborghen wegghen te doorgronden, daar wy onze bepaalde [*beperkte*] menscheyd ende onze eyghen wegghen noch int minste niet en kunnen verstaan? Dat wy zoo vlytelyck spueren om ydele ende wroeghende kennisse te bekomen, met moedwilligh verzuym vande ware ende vruchtbare, ja noodzakelycke kennisse ons zelves?«⁴³

⁴² Cf. Becker’s introduction (v. fn. 2), XVI: « In zijn andere geschriften heeft Coornhert over zijn eigen ‘ongheleertheit ende onkonstigheit’ gesproken, en herhaaldelijk onderstreept dat hij maar een ‘ongeleerde idioot’ was. Hij had zeker gelijk zich als een ongeleerden leek te beschouwen in vergelijking met zijn tegenstanders, waartoe o.a. Calvijn, Beza, Prof. Danaeus, Prof. Saravia en Prof. Lipsius behoorden. Men mag dus aan de *Wellevenskunste* niet te hooge eischen stellen en moet bij het lezen steeds in gedachten houden dat het een populair werk moest zijn, dat bovendien geschreven is door iemand die geen universiteitsopleiding had genoten, evenmin een Latijnsche school had bezocht en Latijn had geleerd toen hij al in de dertig was.». See : *W.W.* III : 48c. and *W.W.* I :357^c; II 248^d, 259^a; III 45^d, 47^b, 288^{bis}, 343^d. Yet, this acknowledgement of one’s own limitations also refers to the topos of the Socratic wise man, cf. ZK IV, VII. 71 and ZK V, VII. 53.

⁴³ Toe-eyghen brief, 2.

Even if Coornhert doesn't mention the term "ongheleerden" in his dedication, he principally addresses his text to the "partydighe menschen" (Toe-eyghen brief, 2) or "biased people"⁴⁴, meaning all of those – especially the scholars - who live in "onverstandighe blindheyd" (Toe-eyghen brief, 3) by ignoring that one important moral Truth they can find within themselves and that will lead them to a life of virtue. Scholars don't know this Truth because they simply don't look for it: instead, they only analyze dark books⁴⁵, preferring the writings of their teachers over Scripture, in the attempt to understand God and thereby overcome their human limitations. Consequently, they lack that necessary knowledge of the self⁴⁶ which they could easily acquire through self-contemplation. They give in to perpetual speculation or "vernunftelizeren » which prevents them from morally improving themselves and only brings them bitterness and distress (Toe-eyghen brief, 2). Hence Coornhert's motto "Weet of rust"⁴⁷: even knowledge calls for moderation or it becomes "Adamsche weetghiericheyd » (Toe-eyghen brief, 2).

It is not without coincidence that both of the above expressions have a double meaning. In a theoretical sense, the expression « weet of rust » renders Coornhert's position against curiosity or « weetghiericheyd » for it being an ill-directed « leerghiericheyd »⁴⁷ destined to gain knowledge that is only within God's reach⁴⁸. In a practical sense, the expression refers to the danger of not acting according to secure knowledge or « weten ». Only reasonable doubt⁴⁹, says Coornhert, leads us to the « weten » that brings us peace of mind, whereas thoughtless actions breed misconception which in turn leads to unhappiness. In Coornhert's view, Adam just as any man must have only aspired to do good. Unfortunately, he allowed

⁴⁴ See ZK II, IV. 5: "Hier komtmen in twyfele, zonder datmen van zodanighen zake dan noch een oordeel heeft. Dit heetmen eyghentlyck onpartydigh of zonder voor oordeel te wezen. Hoewel men oock niet heel zonder reden oock onpartydigh noemt luyden die nu van een zake al een oordeel hebben, maar dat zo los, dat zy bereyt zyn zulck huer oordeel te gheven om een beter. » On the second page of the "Toe-Eyghen brief", Coornhert narrows this definition down to the group of scholars who only read the writings of their teachers and forget Scripture: « De partydighe lezen zelden de godlyke, maar doorghaans de menschelyke schriften, te weten: elck die ghemaackt zyn byde leraren daar an hy is hanghende. Daar inne vinden zy luttel dat henluyder Adamsche weetghiericheyd mach vernoeghen, maar veel dat de zelve meer ende meer vergrotet ende tot meer onghenoeghens voert. »

⁴⁵ See ZK I, IX. 18.

⁴⁶ See Toe-eyghen brief, 2 and ZK II, V. 38.

⁴⁷ *i.e.* the desire for knowledge.

⁴⁸ See ZK I, VIII. 12 and « Hert-spiegel godlijcker schriften. », in : *Wercken I*, Amsterdam, Jacob Aertsz., 1632, 141. Also see HENK BONGER and ARIE-JAN GELDERBLOM, *Weet of rust : proza van Coornhert*, Amsterdam, Querido, 1993 and HENK BONGER, *Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert. Studie over een nuchter en vroom Hollander*, Lochem, De Tijdstroom, 43.

⁴⁹ ZK II, V. 34 : « wel twyfelen is zo behulpelycken voorderinghe tot het zeker weten. »

himself to be led by illusion, therefore ignoring the certainty of God's law and eating from Tree of knowledge of good and evil. This only brought him fear, pain and shame.

Furthermore, the reference to Adam's *curiositas* fulfills yet another meaning in the light of Coornhert's project : it also accords with Coornhert's belief that the only kind of certain knowledge for man comes from within himself, and that the turn of the self instigated by this knowledge can only be acquired through a thorough work of that self on itself.

Having chosen to principally write for the not classically educated burgher, Coornhert does not elaborate on every form of knowledge⁵⁰. In fact, the taxonomy of the different kinds of knowledge isn't what interests him in the first place: for his ethical project, only the difference between "kennisse" and "wetenschap" is relevant to him. Yet, Coornhert does complicate matters, at least for the modern reader: he defines "wetenschap" by using the exact term he wants to contrast it with, namely "kennisse". Given this overlap between Coornhert's definitions of "kennisse" and "wetenschap", a general understanding of the *Zedekunst*'s project is needed to distinguish both of the terms correctly.

Regarding the notion "wetenschap", Coornhert gives two definitions, the first one being as follows:

» Maar de vierde toestemming der kennissen hangt an ware, zekere, ende noodzakelycke voortstellen [*conclusies*], ghenomen uyt ontwyfelycke bewyzinghen, 'tzy dan uyt verzochtheyd [*ervaring*], uyte beginselen der betrachtighen of uyt en wet der naturen. Ende deze werdt ghenaamt wetenschap. « (ZK II, V. 11)

Coornhert's description of the term looks quite ambivalent, since it seems to mix up epistemological ("beginselen" or axioms) and moral categories ("verzochtheyd" or experience and "wet der naturen" or natural law). This is due to one of his central beliefs by which the unity of an important (moral) concept – be it truth or virtue – is proven by the circular relation between its components:

» Het en magh gheen een zelve ding zyn dat verschillende is in zyn oorsprong, of in zyn ghedaante, of int ghene het in bestaat, of eynde, of wercking, of vrucht. Alle deze onghelyckheyden zyn ontwyfelyck tusschen het gheloven ende weten.« (ZK II, V. 20)

Therefore, "wetenschap" both originates in and consists of valid theorems or "voortstellen" and "beginselen der betrachtighen". Virtue, in turn, simultaneously forms the goal, the

⁵⁰ Cf. ZK II, V. 2.

means and the reward for virtue: becoming virtuous is acting virtuously and vice-versa. The same principle counts for the “law of nature” that, as indicated earlier, forms the core of the virtuous life because it provides us with the necessary moral knowledge:

» D'alder eerste wortel inden mensche, daar uyt de wetenschappe, voortkomt, is de nature zelve. Want de gheneghenheyd [*neiging*] om te weten is allen redelycken menschen angeboren. Doch heeft hy rechte oorzake om tot ware wetenschap te komen die daar weet dat hy onwetende is.« (ZK II, V. 33)

As is implied throughout the entire text of the *Zedekunst*, the circularity of this concept lies in the fact that its very rediscovering consists in our acting according to it.

A second reason why Coornhert's definition of the term “wetenschap” is problematic, lies in the fact that he uses its antonym “kennis” to define it - even though claiming that both of the notions are radically different. In the fifth chapter of the second book, Coornhert says that the difference between “kennisse” and “wetenschap” corresponds with that between, respectively, “faith” and “truth”⁵¹. The comparison between “kennisse” and faith would lead us to believe that Coornhert understands the term “kennisse” to indicate only those forms of knowledge of which the truthfulness is impossible to verify. This could be corroborated by the fact that, aside from this prime example, Coornhert also refers to the specific “kennisse” provided by the senses and emotive responses, again most often false. Faith, in turn, forms a special kind of knowledge because according to Coornhert its falseness arises from the fact that man usually believes on grounds of the credibility of others:

» Ende ten laatsten als het toestemmen zich betrouwt alleenlyck op des zegghers gheloofwaardicheyd, ghelyck als wy Christenen, horende: dat zeyt Christus, dat Moyses, dat Isaijas, dat Mattheus, dat Paulus, zulck zegghen zonder eenigh twyfelen toestemmen. Dit heetmen ghelooven.« (ZK II, V. 7)

Again, Coornhert follows Boethius' Lady Philosophy in stating that it is the message, not the messenger that really counts. His words unmistakably show a controversial character for they question belief in general: man mostly follows other men instead of divine revelation. It is this lack of a reliable criterion for truth which partly explains why Coornhert fiercely condemns religious persecution⁵².

⁵¹ ZK II, V. 19.

⁵² ZK II, V. 22-23.

The definition of knowledge as faith suggests that “wetenschap” and “kennisse” are simply antonyms, whereas they are not: aside from this comparison with faith, Coornhert principally treats the concept of “kennisse” as an overarching notion for every form of “knowing”, be it true or false. In this sense, it can also incorporate wetenschap as its “vierde toestemming”, the one that is always reliable. I would therefore suggest that « wetenschap » can at best be translated as « truth ». The concept of « kennisse » can be rendered by the general notion of “knowledge”. Coornhert’s second definition of “wetenschap” supports this choice:

» zo houde ick de kennisse of wetenschappe, daar af ick nu handele, te zyn een warachtigh verstand der dinghen, te weten een ontwyfelyck begrip des ghemoeds door zekere redene ende oorzaken vanden dinghen diemen weet. Of wetenschap is (na 'tzegghen van andere) een zeker verstand, vastelyck besloten (geconcludeerd uit) uyt warachtighe voortstellen [*premissen*].« (ZK II, V. 14)

That said, Coornhert explains his inconsistency in distinguishing “kennisse” from “wetenschap” further down the page. Except for chapter V of the second book, he chose to use both notions as synonyms because he considers it to be a widespread practice among his primary public, the common citizen: “Ick menghe hier by wylen onder een de woorden kennisse ende wetenschappe ende dit na de ghemeen wyze des volx » (ZK II, V. 16). From this it becomes clear that Coornhert pays a lot of attention to reaching his readers. The advantage of this strategy of relating to their world, lies in the fact that it furthers the transfer of knowledge Coornhert holds necessary to their moral conversion.

Even more important than the two definitions above, Coornhert also presents “wetenschap” as an umbrella term for two specific kinds of knowledge that stand in a circular relation to each other and are therefore never to be separated in view of the virtuous life:

» Wel is waar datmen vint voornemelyck tweereleye wetenschappen, elck tot een zonderling [*afzonderlijk*] eynde streckende, zo dat de betrachtelycke kennisse opte waarheyd, ende die hantteerlycke opte werckinghe der dueghden 't oghe heeft. Maar des niet te min en werdt noch die betrachtelycke van niemanden verkreghen zonder dat innerlycke werck vant betrachten, van anmercken, van nadencken, redenpleghinghe ende overweghinghe van 't een teghen 't ander.« (ZK II, V. 52)

Coornhert designates these two kinds of knowledge as “betrachtelycke” and “hantteerlycke”, respectively theoretical and practical knowledge. Both kinds of knowledge are contemplative of nature⁵³, forming the two main currents of traditional philosophy symbolized by the letters

⁵³ This also appears from the etymology of the term “betrachtelyck”. Cf. <http://gtb.inl.nl/?owner=WNT>.

pi en theta embroidered on the dress of Boethius' Lady Philosophy. And yet again, the term "kennisse" is used to define "wetenschap".

In short, it appears from chapter V that Coornhert's "wetenschap" pertains to truthful knowledge. The specific nature of this kind of knowledge only becomes clear in light of the general purpose of the *Zedekunst*: moral improvement of its readers. From this point of view it is easy to understand that Coornhert's "wetenschap" stands for moral Truth of which the ultimate embodiment is God. Therefore, his "wetenschap" cannot be translated as "science", since it is subjective and doesn't refer to an objective scientific truth that can be verified by sensorial experience⁵⁴. The subjectivity of this kind of knowledge doesn't contradict its veracity: "wetenschap" has, can, and should be continuously verified through life-experience that will prove its reliability.

The most important difference between "kennisse" and "wetenschap" lies in this very possibility of verification by life experience. In his first definition of "wetenschap", Coornhert calls the result of this verification "verzochtheyd" (ZK II, V. 11). It goes without saying that self-contemplation plays a very important part in this process, as will be discussed below. It comes down to this: in order to assert whether knowledge is truthful, it has to be verified by the everyday experience of every man. The truthfulness of knowledge only ever dawns upon us after being put into question over and over again:

» Maar als men ziet int licht met andacht, de dinghen recht verstaat ende men die allengskens oeffent metter daad, dan verlaatmen de loghen, dan volghtmen de waarheyd ende dan werdtmen dueghdlyck. Dan ismen ghescheyden uyten duysteren nacht van onwetenheyd, gheghaan door de schemerighe twyfel des wanens ende ghekomen inden dagh des klaren wetenschaps.« (ZK II, V. 48)

Whereas "wetenschap" or truth will never deceive the one who follows it and bring serenity and peace of mind, false knowledge - the true nature of which is often clouded by human desire⁵⁵ - will prove itself to bring nothing but unhappiness, if not immediately, certainly after a certain period of time⁵⁶.

For Coornhert, this difference between "kennisse" and "wetenschap" is essential, since only truthful knowledge or "weten" as he puts it can make it possible for man to act truly virtuously, in accordance with God's laws. In Coornhert's paradigm, this "weten" is

⁵⁴ I therefore chose to translate the chapter's title by "Of knowledge and Truth".

⁵⁵ ZK II, V. 45-46.

⁵⁶ ZK II, V. 44-45.

synonymous to both “ware kennis” and “wetenschap” and is also closely related to the first cardinal virtue of “wisdom”. Just as in one of the *Zedekunst*’s main sources, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Coornhert does not aspire to a mere theoretical (*sophia*), but an applied wisdom – the *phronêsis* of ancient tradition. This becomes clear in the following definition of wisdom, which refers to the individual’s responsibility towards other members of the household or of the civil community :

» Daeromme trede ick nu van deze alghemeyne wysheyd tot de byzondere, diemen hemeenlyck deylt in drie hoofleden, hoogh dienstlyck zynde totter menschen onderwyzing ter dueghden, dats tot wellevens kunste. Deze werden ghenomen na de verscheydenheyd wezende int menschelycke leven, mede in dryen begrepen zynde. Want daar is een wyze van leven die elck mensche op zich zelf beroert, een die elck huysghesinde in desselfs beleding [*bestuur*] anghaat, ende een die tot onderhouding vande ghemeene tsamenwooning der menschen dienende is. Het eerste is een eenzaam [*persoonlijk*], het tweede is een huyslyck ende het derde is een burgherlyck leven. Dit laatste werdt het alderwaardighste gheacht, als meest inde hantering van 'tghemeene ghoed (dat verde het alderbeste is) bestaande. Maar hier toe en komtmen niet dan by trappen. Want die niet wys en is, en kan zich zelf niet wel bestieren, vele minder een huysghezinde ende noch vele minder het ghemeen beste.« (ZK III, V. 22-25)

This leaves us with the question which exact kind of moral truth connects these three kinds of wisdom. The next few lines provide us with an answer:

» Noodzakelyck is alle wetenschappe die daar pooght of maackt dat de hertstochten haar dienen ende gehoorzamen, maar onnut, ja schadelyck is de kennisse die een dienaarsse blyft vande ghewoonlycke hertstochten ende haar laat mesbruycken in d’een om zyn onkuysheyd, in d’ander om zyn ghiericheyd [*i.e.*], om wraackghiericheyd ende andere zonden te dienen.« (ZK II, V, 37).

Here Coornhert clearly states that only secure knowledge regarding the good management of our emotions, desires and fears, is really necessary. This applies simultaneously to each of the three levels of human action mentioned above: “hier toe en komtmen niet dan by trappen » (ZK III, V. 25). The reason why Coornhert pays this much attention to the topic of human emotions, lies in the fact that he perceives of badly handled or controlled passions as the second most important obstacle to the ideal of virtuous life he wants to carry out; the first one being “plain ignorance” or the earlier mentioned “onverstandighe blindheyd”.

“Betrachtelycke” vs. “hantteerlycke” kennis.

As suggested above, Coornhert’s thought on human emotions is central to the perfectibilist project of the *Zedekunst*. The importance of this topic is firstly proven by the fact that it covers the whole of the *Zedekunst*’s first book (as Coornhert also points out in his introduction to book II). Its actual centrality however most evidently – and not without significance – appears from the fifth chapter of the second book, the title of which as I said can be rendered as “Of knowledge and Truth”. As I have shown, Coornhert considers the virtuous life to be by any means inaccessible if one doesn’t learn to manage one’s emotions. Hence, knowledge and virtue are closely entangled in the project of the *Zedekunst*⁵⁷, as appeared from the previous analysis of Coornhert’s definitions of “kennisse” and “wetenschap”. These definitions are deeply embedded in his ethical project since they do not refer to pure epistemological, but rather moral concepts.

Throughout the *Zedekunst*, the process of learning to control one’s emotions forms the best example of the two-step conversion that constitutes the very essence of the ideal of “welleven” Coornhert wants to propagate. Each step of this conversion requires a different kind of knowledge. Firstly, it requires the purely theoretical knowledge of emotion-management and the good life. Coornhert refers to this knowledge as “betrachtelycke kennisse” (ZK II, V. 52) and he believes it to lead to « redelycke dueghde » or rational virtue⁵⁸.

As Coornhert further states, every art’s apprentice needs a competent tutor to learn him the basics from which he can develop himself⁵⁹, discover his inner virtue and eventually educate others⁶⁰. As shown above, this “inner virtue” or “natural law” is very important: it not only forms the basis of every man’s possibility to become virtuous, but also of Coornhert’s legitimization of his intellectual authorities. In the case of the *Zedekunst*, the tutor takes the form of a spiritual advisor. Coornhert takes up this role. As an “onder meester” or “ghetuyghe » (ZK I, I. 22), he steers the first conversion of the *Zedekunst*’s readers, the

⁵⁷ ZK II, V. 19: “ande kennisse des menschen al zyn heyl of verderven is ghelegghen. »

⁵⁸ ZK III, I. 24-25.

⁵⁹ ZK I, I. 19.

⁶⁰ Coornhert legitimizes the choice for the virtuous life as a form of gratitude or justice towards God. Man can only express this gratitude indirectly, not only by personal virtue, but also – according to the golden rule - in converting others to the “welleven”: ZK IV, IX. 10.

completion of which he calls “wedergeboorte”⁶¹ since it frees them of their primary sinful state. Coornhert must have thought of himself as already “reborn”⁶², otherwise he wouldn’t have judged himself capable of providing the necessary knowledge to help his readers understand the potential viciousness of their own person and their current state of affairs⁶³ to convert them into “willing” a more virtuous life.

Yet, in spite of his position Coornhert never fails to remain humble: only God has access to the full Truth – for he is Truth. Only He can be the one and only true Teacher or “oppersten leermeester” (ZK I, I. 22). Coornhert on the contrary can only aspire to perfection within the boundaries of human capacity and therefore has to continue questioning himself, as also appears clearly from the ‘Toe-Eyghen brief’:

» Deze myne arbeyd heb ick ghaerne tot yghelyx betering ghedaan; alle vrome luyden (zonderlinghe ghy oock, jonstige Spieghel) zullen oock ghaerne de moeyten nemen van my, tot myn beteringhe, an te wyzen myne dolinghen die hier inne moghen wezen. Dit zal my een ghewenschte beloninghe zyn voor deze myne willighe moeyten. Want ick ben mede een mensche als andere, die zo lichtelyck magh dolen, als ick onghaerne dole. God alleen, gheen mensch, weet het alles; die is Gode naast, die de minste dolinghe heeft. Zo is oock die opten wech om de minste dolinghen te behouden, die meest bereyt is om ter liefden vande waarheyd zyn dolinghen rondelyck te bekennen ende spoedelyck te verlaten.« (Toe-Eyghen brief, 5)

As a result of the perfect virtuous life being *de facto* unattainable for man⁶⁴, it can finally only consist in an act of constant self-conversion based on the self-knowledge one first gains through self-contemplation both instigated and guided by the tutor’s lessons, and that one subsequently has to deepen through autonomous self-contemplation. This is the case for both Coornhert and his readers. It is this striving for perfection that Coornhert calls “welleven”, not the realisation of the ideal in itself, which obviously explains – aside from the ancient tradition of the *ars vitae*, of course - why Coornhert speaks of the virtuous life in terms of an “art”⁶⁵.

Coornhert not only uses this metaphor in the title of his ethic, he also returns to it on several occasions throughout the *Zedekunst*. For not only does his reader need a tutor to teach him the essential rules of the art of virtue, he also needs to put them into practice to understand them

⁶¹ For further information see “Vande wedergeboorte, hoe die gheschiet” and “Ladder Jacobs, de trappe der deughden », in: *Wercken I*, Amsterdam, Jacob Aertsz., 1632.

⁶² See ZK I, I. 20 : « Want niemand en kan anderen 'tgheen hen zelf onbekent is, te recht onderwyzen. »

⁶³ Toe-eyghen brief, 4.

⁶⁴ Cf. *supra*, n. 4.

⁶⁵ Cf. ZK I. I. 13.

better and to become a better man. In other words, Coornhert holds that true virtue cannot exist without the “betrachtelycke kennisse” – in itself the result of the “hantteerlycke kennisse” he received from others, *i.e.* the Bible or those pagan authors in accordance with it - he delivers being put into practice to become the “hantteerlycke kennisse” of his readers, without rational virtue leading to moral virtue or “zedelycke deughde”, the ultimate goal of his ethic⁶⁶. As for the difference between “betrachtelycke” and “hantteerlycke” knowledge on the one hand, and rational and moral virtue on the other, it lies in the fact that the first two are mere theoretical concepts of which the last two notions already define the practical result: virtue. By definition, virtue cannot be other than practice. Coornhert stresses this idea throughout the *Zedekunst*⁶⁷:

» Want waar de mensche onredelyck ende blind, vergheefs waar 'tlicht; blijft de mensche onachtzaam, vergheefs ist licht voort open oghe des Redens. Ghebreeckt daar tyd om 'tghen men verstaat te hanteren, vergheefs is ghezicht, licht ende opmercking om dueghdlyck te worden. Want niemand en kan eenighe kunste die hy noyt en heeft gehantteert.« (ZK II, V. 47)

True knowledge without practice is “onvruchtbare verbeelding”, dead knowledge⁶⁸. So, just like in ancient philosophy, Coornhert subordinates theory to practice⁶⁹.

After this first, externally appealed conversion through theoretical knowledge, follows a conversion based on practice motivated from the inside. After being reborn, the life art-apprentice needs to deepen and complete the received knowledge through constant self-contemplation of which only he is responsible. This theoretical knowledge, of course, comes from another individual’s self-contemplation: Coornhert. In this sense, the *Zedekunst* itself is also an act of self-conversion. One look at the first lines of the ‘Toe-eyghen brief’ suffices to understand this:

» Hier ziedy, Jonstighe [*goedgunstige*] Spieghel, mynre ghedachten spieghel vande zonden ende dueghden int Licht voortkomen voor alle mans ghezichte. Zo nu iemand zich daar inne

⁶⁶ See III, I. 33.

⁶⁷ ZK III, I. 25 and ZK I, I. 23.

⁶⁸ Cf. ZK I, I. 26.

⁶⁹ HADOT (v. fn. 40), 294: “La vie philosophique consiste-t-elle donc seulement à appliquer à chaque instant des théorèmes que l’on possède bien, pour résoudre les problèmes de la vie? En fait, lorsqu’on réfléchit à ce qu’implique la vie philosophique, on s’aperçoit qu’il y a un abîme entre la théorie philosophique et le philosophe comme action vivante. L’artiste lui aussi a l’air de se contenter d’appliquer des règles. Mais il y a aussi une distance incommensurable entre la théorie abstraite de l’art et la création artistique. Or, dans la philosophie, il ne s’agit pas seulement de créer une oeuvre d’art, mais de se transformer soi-même.”

alzo spieghelt datze hem dient tot ware kennisse van zynen state, dats van zich zelve, die heeft naast Gode ende zyn andachtigh opmercken in dezen spieghel, die ick u mits dezen toe eyghene, u daar af te bedancken.« (Toe-eyghen brief, 1)

With the *Zedekunst*, Coornhert claims to offer a personal work to his readers, a work he calls his “mirror of thoughts”. In order to form others, he first needed the help of others to look within himself, again question himself and thereby convert and correct himself again. For a great part, these “others” are his *auctoritates*. Although a theoretical work, Coornhert’s ethic can be considered an example of rational virtue being put into practice. As stated earlier, Coornhert avoided the personal anecdote in order to reach a larger public.

So, in short: Coornhert expects and encourages his reader to pursue insight in his own condition. This insight he calls the “necessary knowledge of the self” (ZK II, V. 38), and it mainly consists of learning how to manage one’s emotions⁷⁰. In this ideal of emotional and moral self-guidance, which is based on secure knowledge and in Coornhert’s terms can be described as the combination of moderation (“tem-lust”⁷¹) and gentleness (“zachtmoedicheyd”⁷²), lies the goal of Coornhert’s perfectibilist life-philosophy. It is at this point that the three motives I mentioned in the introduction, perfectibility – knowledge – and moderation, intersect.

Conclusion.

In Coornhert’s moral program God, divine grace and the Bible play a very important role. As I have shown, ancient authorities are only used insofar as they are in accordance with the Scripture. But more interesting than scrutinizing the whole *Zedekunst* to find each and every author Coornhert has used, is to examine the way in which his specific use of these intellectual authorities fits in with the role of knowledge in the ethical ideal he wants to carry out. As we know, Coornhert’s ideal of the virtuous life calls for a twofold moral conversion. To further this conversion, Coornhert practically never mentions his authorities by name. This of course allows him to relate to the world of the burghers he wants his *Zedekunst* first of all to attain. More importantly, this absence of explicit quotation also accords with Coornhert’s ideal of moral self-regulation on grounds of a norm that comes from inside – not outside- the

⁷⁰ ZK II, V. 58.

⁷¹ ZK VI, V, 10.

⁷² ZK VI, VI. 1.

individual in question. Or better: on grounds of an outside norm reflecting the inner virtue or “natural law” of that individual, a law the internalization of which makes the individual understand that he’d only ever forgotten that same inner virtue. Stressing the fact that the moral knowledge in the *Zedekunst* is provided by others would impede the reader from reaching that second stage of his conversion that leads to true virtue. As Coornhert states, the virtuous life is essentially an art, and just as any other art, one has to live and breathe it or else it would never be other than plain dead knowledge.