

When Happiness was a new idea in Europe: the Dutch Golden Age from a Unificationist Perspective

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Dear all,

I hope you are fine. In August, I sent you a PPT on the Dutch Golden Age, as the forerunner of the society of kong saeng, kong yong, kong ui (interdependence, mutual etc ...) and I thank you for the reactions.

I am now writing an article for the *Journal of Unification Studies*. I still have a month to finish the essay, which has to be much more academic. At present, it consists of around 8,000 words, from page 1 to page 11 of the attached document. It contains many detailed insights absent from the PPT, so it is really something new and different.

Also, the main thesis here is that the Dutch Republic was mostly trying to create a happy society. The central idea is that the Dutch Republic was to realize Eudaimonia (Aristotle's view of happiness), combining virtue (Arete) and practical wisdom (phronesis). Netherlands was a modern society where Calvinism was providing the virtue, whereas science and technology were bringing the practical wisdom. The essay also tries to understand why Hegel thought so highly of the "absorption in the daily life" and saw it as something truly great.

If you want to have some ideas about what the essay will be like, you may read the following 2,300 words, or just the beginning of it. I am hoping to get a few insights which will be very helpful for me. The PPT of August is again here, for those who did not see it, or would like to remember some points.

Thank you

When Happiness was a new idea in Europe: the Dutch Golden Age from a Unificationist Perspective

The quest of happiness appears in the first sentence of the Divine Principle, "Every human being is struggling to attain life-long happiness and overcome misfortune". Here, we are talking about achieving a lasting satisfaction as a result of a commitment and not about something that merely *happens* (the etymology of happiness) for a while. There is also a warning that the first step is to overcome misfortune.

The struggle to move away from misfortune and seek a lasting happiness, more than any other factor, drove the Dutch Republic, particularly through most of the seventeenth Century. This period is sometimes labeled the Golden Century or the Dutch miracle. There are several reasons for this, and there are certainly many lessons which we can learn from this period, in a Unificationist perspective.

Religion and science worked in harmony, in a joint effort to improve the well-being of the whole population. In many ways, Netherlands was the first nation-State to adopt a republican regime, where the pursuit of liberty, equality and happiness gradually became core values.

From this viewpoint, the "Dutch miracle", popularized by K.W. Swart, can be a misleading expression. The Dutch enjoyed a fortune which was neither miraculous, nor the effect of luck. Prompted by vision and courage, they made bold and steady choices, whereas neighboring countries remained at the stage of wishful thinking.

In Hegelian terms, the Golden Age was the age where the ideal had descended on the earth and was no longer alienated in the reality. It was alive in the practical existence of the common people. He praised their "utterly living absorption in the world and its daily life". In other words, the Dutch people had created a society where the ideal and the reality tend to unite in the normal existence: the ordinary people were in communion with the Spirit not just in their religious life, but in everyday existence. We shall later mention this "biblicisation of the daily life" as a distinct feature of the Golden Age.

The Golden Age when the reality tried to match the ideal

For Hegel, the "absorption in the daily life" far from being vulgar and merely secular, was a part of a theodicy, of a Providence at work in the Dutch society,

What fascinated Hegel so much is none other than freedom. Later, we shall suggest that Netherlands at that time was a pioneer of the modern four freedoms. This is what Hegel observed in their civilization.

The Dutch have made the greatest part of the land on which they dwell and live; it has continually to be defended against the storms of the sea, and it has to be maintained. By resolution, endurance, and courage, townsmen and countrymen alike threw off the Spanish dominion [...], and by fighting won for themselves freedom in political life and in religious life too. This citizenship, this love of enterprise, in small things as in great, in their own land as on the high seas, this painstaking as well as cleanly and neat well-being, this joy and exuberance in their own sense that for all this they have their own activity to thank, all this is what constitutes the general content of their pictures.

Indeed, Netherlands was then living a national dream, a national myth which cannot be measured quantitatively. The population was inspired by the vision of a happy society, where common people would find deeper and deeper satisfactions through steady progress. According to Simon Schama the question of "how to create a moral order in an earthly paradise" dominated the Dutch Golden Age, or to speak like Aristotle: how do virtue and happiness walk together? How long? Can a society aim at the good, while seeking the goods of the earth? Can the quest of spiritual values (truth, goodness and beauty) go hand in hand with the pursuit of material values? How much can we integrate heavenly laws, human laws and natural laws, in order to arrive at a better life? Aristotle did not believe in a perfect and platonic Republic guided by king-philosophers. He envisioned a social life of gradual progress toward the good. The Dutch Golden Century implemented much of the Eudaimonia sought by Aristotle. Much later, Tocqueville studied the life of Americans in the nascent American Democracy and wrote,

"I considered mores to be one of the great general causes responsible for the maintenance of a democratic republic . . . the term *mores* . . . meaning . . . habits of the heart."

Analyzing the history of the Western civilization, the Divine Principle observes the following,

Religion and economy are integrated with our life in the society through politics. Especially in Western Europe, politics have sought to connect economic development, which has closely followed the progress of science, with the path of Christianity . . .

This was a paramount concern of the Dutch Republic.

(...)

This may explain some exceptional moments of human history, for instance the Dutch Golden Age. Emile Durkheim called these moments the times of collective effervescence,

"At such moments, this higher form of life is lived with such intensity and exclusiveness that it monopolizes all minds to the more or less complete exclusion of egoism and the commonplace. At such times, the ideal tends to become one with the real, and for this reason men have the impression that the time is close when the ideal will in fact be realized and the Kingdom of God established on earth."

Interestingly, Spinoza was the main Dutch thinker of the 17th century. Joy is central in his thought. The human being, in his philosophy, is the "being-for-joy". (...) Spinoza wrote

The Mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, indeed, explain to us the affects of Joy and Sadness. By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection. And by Sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection. The affect of Joy which is related to the Mind and Body at once I call Pleasure or Cheerfulness, and that of Sadness, Pain or Melancholy

The Dutch people were struggling to find greater and greater happiness in a world of trouble, and Spinoza's ethics may be read as summarizing, albeit in a very idealistic way, the quintessence of their aspiration. The Dutch people believed in a steady progress toward lasting happiness, and Spinoza tried to connect this step-by-step endeavor of the daily life on earth to the quest of eternal joy.

The Divine Principle suggests that the restoration of all things is the foundation to restore human beings who lost their essence and dignity, and were degraded. It is not wrong to love things, take care of them, provided they are offered to God and serve the community. A certain number of still life paintings suggest, in a very Spinozist way, that the joys of the daily life, of the present moment, are the first steps of the ascension toward eternal joy. When human beings improve their relationship to the natural world, they also grow spiritually, become more human, but also more divine. The true religion does not ask us to deny the material and human realities, but to connect them with a heavenly dimension which is in our midst.

And Spinoza, in this sense, is the one who may have captured the secret quest of the Golden Age more deeply than anyone. A noble person is able to appreciate the beauty of the real world as a glimpse, a mirror of eternal beauty. This led Spinoza to write, "By reality and perfection, I mean the same thing."

The religious life is not a secluded, contemplative, and seraphic existence, it is a life of incarnation, where divine secrets are revealed to each of us, to the common man, here and now.

When discussing the Reformation and Renaissance, the Divine Principle makes an observation, which applies quite much to the Dutch Golden Age

According to the Principle of Creation, we are created to attain perfection by fulfilling our given responsibility of our own free will, without God's direct assistance. We are then to attain oneness with God and acquire true autonomy. Therefore, it is the calling of our original nature to pursue freedom and autonomy. A person of perfect character understands the Will of God and puts it into practice through his own insight and reason, without the need to rely on revelations from God. Hence, it is only natural that we pursue reason and understanding. We also are endowed with the God-given right to master the natural world, to tame and cultivate it in order to create a pleasant living environment, by investigating the hidden laws of nature through science. Hence, we value the natural world, pursue science, and esteem the practical life.

The Dutch Eudaimonia

What made the Dutch rejoice, then? Far from pursuing a form of private *Hedonism* or *Ataraxy*, they sought the Aristotelian *Eudaimonia* ("doing and living well" also translated as "human flourishing"). One might also speak of a practical wisdom, combining ethics and political philosophy. This Eudaimonia, however, has a typically modern flavor, which cannot be found in Aristotle's thought, and this has to do with the urban life, the triumph of patrician values and the growing importance of techniques.

In the 17th century, Netherlands became a very urbanized country, where machines, tools, techniques were making life much easier and more convenient. The population adopted a way of life which announced the future utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and many trends of pragmatism. For the Dutch, the good was partly revealed by Heaven, partly discovered by human reason, and partly dictated by the best adjustment to a fluctuating reality. This is because human beings try to revere the Absolute Being while living in an imperfect society in a certain environment, and can head for the ideal gradually, through trials and errors. Shying away from dogmatism, the Dutch people were empirical, advocating an optimistic *whatever works*. Many decisions had to be taken by consensus, among well educated people, who often were trained in business and management. This kind of governance had no choice but to seek "the greatest happiness of the greatest number", long before Jeremy Bentham would express it. More than a philosophy or an ideology, it was some form of *weltanschauung*, which was shared by a majority of people.

The difference with pragmatism, and this is in line with Aristotle, was that the Dutch Republic sought a constant balance between *arete* (virtue, or simply excellence) and *phronesis* (practical or ethical wisdom). In this atmosphere, the Dutch art of painting attained a level of inspiration, of sublime beauty and of spiritual depth that has no real equivalent. This remains a source of amazement even today. How can we create a society of abundance, which is physically pleasant, while also investing in an exuberant creativity, where art and thinking are of paramount importance?

How can we characterize the Golden Age? First of all, the Dutch Republic seems to illustrate two major theories of the British historian Arnold Toynbee: the theory of *challenge and response*, and the theory of *creative minorities*. Focusing on the spiritual factors behind the rise of a civilization, Toynbee wrote,

"Man achieves civilization, not as a result of superior biological endowment or geographical environment, but as a response to a challenge in a situation of special difficulty which rouses him to make a hitherto unprecedented effort."

Third, by making this bold choice, the Dutch Republic became the successful forerunner of what would be called, much later, the four freedoms: freedom of worship and conscience, freedom of expression, freedom from fear, and freedom from want

The freedom from want and freedom from fear in the Golden Century involved more than the external, technical aspects of human security. Ideally, human security means a safety *of* human beings, *by* human beings and *for* human beings. Regulations and protections are important, but human security starts with free and responsible persons, who follow their conscience and reap what they sow.

The Dutch mindset remains that if you follow good principles and habits in your daily life, you may reduce risk factors considerably.

The Reformation and the Renaissance had liberated human beings from the oppression, the fetters, the ignorance and stagnation of the feudal society. However, people who are *liberated from* servitude, do not always know clearly what they are *free for*. Throughout the 16th century and until the Treaty of

Westphalia, in 1648, the practical implications of the Reformation and of the Renaissance met a strong resistance, almost everywhere. In this context of uncertainty, the Dutch Republic was not only a safer place, it was a nation where most people felt more free than elsewhere to think, to speak, to write, and to worship, without being ostracized or intimidated. As already suggested, they felt that the time had come for the main ideas of the Reformation and Renaissance to create a new political and social model.

The greatest legacy of William the Silent was the foundation of the university of Leiden. He gave two missions to the university. First, it was to provide some kind of Protestant vision to the country which was liberating itself from Spain and Catholicism. Second, it was to serve a purpose of nation-building by educating the citizens in all fields of modern knowledge. William the Silent is called the Father of the Fatherland (Vader des Vaderlands). More mystically, he appeared as the Moses to those who saw God's special election on the birth of the new nation. There are two reasons for that. First, he reigned exactly for 40 years (1544-1584), a number which is very significant in the Biblical account of Moses' life. Second, he was seen as the religious leader, but also statesman who had liberated his people from the Pharaoh (Philip II) and was acting as some sort of national visionary and legislator for the new nation.