

# **No Culture, No Europe On the Foundation of Politics**

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**European Culture  
Between  
Rationality and  
Reason**

**Barend van Heusden**



### Introduction

In order to tackle the issue of 'cultural awareness and expression' in Europe, which was designated by the former European Commission as one of the eight key competencies to be acquired in European lifelong education (European Commission, 2007), I will distinguish and systematically relate three levels of meaning of the concept of 'culture'.

On a first level, which can be labelled 'anthropological', the concept of culture relates to the ways in which humans give form and meaning to their life and environment. In view of distinguishing human from animal cultures, it has been argued that the uniqueness of human culture resides in the fact that humans not only are able to learn things — this being an ability shared with quite a few other species — but are also able to interpret the world intentionally. This means that humans are not tied to a single interpretation of reality, but are free to interpret any situation in a variety of ways. Take, for example, the use of different images, words, metaphors, or value qualifications. In order to do so, we must be able to distinguish the reservoir of potential meanings available from the single reality that is interpreted — which comes down to the very familiar, but from an evolutionary point rather unique capacity to distinguish between memory and reality. Reality always eludes our memories of it; it is dynamic, changeable, and potentially unpredictable. This is a defining characteristic of human culture, of our 'condition humaine'. There is nothing specifically European about that.

### European Culture

However, the ways in which humans have dealt with this unavoidable difference between memory (what is known) and reality (what is experienced) at the heart of culture have varied enormously throughout human history and can be used to characterize different cultures. And here European culture stands out. It is difficult to tell when and where it originated, but it probably came about in waves — starting in Greek Antiquity, and developing slowly but steadily in Roman and Christian times. With the Enlightenment a European culture was definitely established. Its main tenet is quite simple: ratio rules over beliefs. The European project has been and still is a continuous attempt to tame beliefs and give them a place and function within an overarching rational framework. The advantages of a culture based on rational thinking

are obvious: instead of dealing with the difference that reality continuously generates in terms of metaphysical values, these values are understood, within the rational perspective, as choices deriving from, indeed, values that people or groups of people adhere to for a variety of reasons. Values are not, from a rational point, an aspect of nature; a value is never empirically given. Nature is neutral: it does not care for values. Humans attribute values. One of the important consequences of this Enlightenment perspective was of course that wars between religions and ideologies could now be dealt with in terms of political disputes. Personally I see traffic rules as a nice example of the rationality-over-power perspective which characterizes European culture. In any European country, when the traffic lights are red, I stop — even if my car is ten times bigger than the other car crossing my path. When there are no traffic lights, whoever comes from the right (or from the left in some countries) has the right of way — the power relation between the two drivers is of no consequence. If traffic rules had existed in Greek Antiquity, Oedipus would never have killed his father and no tragedy would have been written about him. We may consider Oedipus as one of the first modern Europeans, and Sophocles as one of its first critics.

In terms of Merlin Donald's theory about the origins of modern culture (Donald, 1991), European culture is basically anti-mythical. It does not consider the universe, or life, as the result of a will and actions but as a fact, determined, in the end, by the laws of nature and logic. European culture is therefore also deeply universalistic, as it is aware of the fact that humanity is not something that pertains or belongs to a particular group or society. European culture cannot but consider itself as global, for the simple reason that it takes a stance on humanity that transcends the particularities of a certain belief or ideology. Our politics, our economics, our education systems are all imbued by this conviction that in order to keep beliefs at bay, a rational framework is necessary: it was a European who wrote that the sleep of reason produces monsters, and how right he was.

The opposition against the dominant rationalist perspective has, in the course of the past centuries, worn different masks but the underlying stance has remained very much the same. Rationalism was criticized from two different sides: that of collective value systems, as represented by religions and ideologies, and that of individual experiences and emotions. Together they were

responsible for the main forms of romanticism — the ideological and the artistic — that are also at the heart of European culture.

### Multiculturalism

In recent debates on multiculturalism the relation between reason and belief is again at stake. In order to understand this problem we have to consider a second meaning of the concept of culture, which is precisely that of collective 'beliefs', or 'customs', or 'ways of doing things' ('traditions'). Now unless one accepts an overarching rational, 'value-less' framework, multiculturalism is simply impossible, because without this overarching framework, beliefs again become what they were before the Enlightenment, that is, metaphysical truths. But on a metaphysical level, multiculturalism is impossible, as one true belief necessarily excludes all others. Therefore, multiculturalism requires all 'cultures' to renounce their claim to truth and accept that there is one overarching common culture which is not metaphysical, which is not about values, and which is that of rationalism. This overarching framework reduces each of the participating cultures to a matter of choices. Beliefs are possibilities, options, often guided by very practical interests. And that, unfortunately, is still hard to swallow for many age-old, or putatively age-old belief systems. Christianity went through this process in Europe in the past centuries, but for many a culture coming from outside Europe it is still one step too far.

### Cultural Awareness

A third meaning of the concept of culture is that of 'collective self-consciousness'. Culture now includes the arts, religion and ideology, the news, historiography and philosophy. The one umbrella uniting all these domains across their differences is the dimension of reflection, of culture pondering itself through perception, criticism, imagination, interpretation, and analysis (Van Heusden, 2009). This is culture-as-awareness or 'cultural awareness'. In European culture, cultural awareness is, or should be guided by the cultural — rational — tenets of the culture it reflects upon. In European education, however, this is still far from obvious, as many educators firmly stand in a romantic tradition of political and artistic opposition against rationalism.

To my mind, a European cultural awareness is an awareness of the uniqueness of the culture that was originally developed

in Europe, and of the great advantages the dominance of reason brought to society. Education in cultural awareness, that is, education in journalism, the arts, heritage and history, citizenship and philosophy should teach Europeans about the basic structure of their culture, and about the consequences of this structure for all the dimensions of public and private life: politics, economics, education, information and more. The very special political project that Europe is will only advance if Europeans are aware of what is really at stake. In order to achieve this, the perennial problem of the tension between rationality on the one hand and collective and individual values on the other hand must be tackled. It must, because unless the issue is cleared, Europe will always face the danger of falling back into romantic movements that aim at re-establishing some dominant creed — be it national, or religious, or political, or sectarian.

### The Return to Reason

One danger that European culture has had to face since its beginnings, and which was very lucidly depicted already by Sophocles in *King Oedipus*, is the danger of the hegemony, not of reason, but of rationality. A rational culture is not the same thing as a culture of reason (Toulmin, 2003). In a culture of reason, which European culture strives to be, rationality is overarching but not all-mighty. In a rational culture, which European culture tends to become, rationality invades all other domains of life as well. The domains of experience and value are either marginalized or colonized; numbers take over in every field, be it care or education, politics or economics. Instead of respecting them as necessary for social and individual life, experiences and values are either considered to be irrelevant, nonsensical and wrong, or they are considered as marketable sources of financial profit.

The strength of the rational perspective, which involves the submission of value-thinking to truth-thinking, is also its weakness. Sophocles saw this danger, which is inherent in a culture based on rational inquiry, very clearly: in a society dominated by rational intelligence, even though this intelligence is capable to solve a great many practical problems (getting rid of sphinxes being only one of them) the community is bound to die, and so are intimate relationships. The pest reigns in Thebe, because Oedipus did not recognize his father, mother and siblings. A good many of the problems Europe is facing today derive from this almost

blind trust in rationalism, in the force of logic and mathematics and scientific research. It seems that the great truth underlying Enlightenment thought from the beginning, namely that value is not 'a matter of fact', has mistakenly been understood as, and perversely turned into: 'values are of no importance', 'values don't count' (pun intended). This is not, however, a correct conclusion, as we are now finding out the hard way. Values may not be matter of fact, but valuing is. It is a dimension of human culture, on an equal footing with perceiving, creating, and knowing.

In order to successfully advance the European project, it seems inevitable to finally make the rational choice for a culture of reason, based on rationality but not solely rational. Only through an immanent, that is: a rational critique, can rationality be kept at bay, and made aware of its own 'regionality' as one of the modes of human existence, cognition, and culture.

In order to be able to live in a culture of reason, one has to learn, first of all, to experience and to attribute values, i.e. to choose. Secondly one has to learn how to argue for and defend one's values in the public space. And, finally, one has to accept that these experiences and values do not and will never coincide with 'reality'. This requires both a strong cultural awareness and the ability to deal with complexity and change.

#### Arts and Cultural Education

An awareness of European culture is an awareness of what allows Europeans to be so different and yet coexist peacefully. It is an insight, as well as a felt experience, not of multiculturalism, but of the unity of a culture based on reason, in which a changing reality can be experienced and valued in a variety of ways, but will never be identified with either the experiences or the values.

What could this mean for one of the main forms of education in cultural awareness, namely arts education? What distinguishes the arts from other forms of cultural awareness, such as journalism, history, politics, or philosophy is that it is a reflection upon life through *imitation*, representing it in the form of a lived experience. Art mirrors experience, and it does so by giving it a palpable, perceivable form. Thanks to this concrete, experiential form we can live or relive the experience, alone or together with others, we can discuss it, or simply ponder it. Art is reflective imagination. It brings life to life — in movement, sound, artefacts, language and graphics.

Art serves to reflect upon life, to get a hold on it. The latter is particularly important, as it explains why art has been practiced since times immemorial. Art is more than a joke, or a no-strings-attached pastime. It helps us gain insight into ourselves, into others and into humanity in general. It contributes to our awareness and self-awareness and with that to our self-image and identity. When we act, we do so upon the basis of this self-image, and the image we have of others. Not in an abstract, conceptual or theoretical way, but through the imaginative recreation of an experience. As such, art is one of the most important forms of cultural awareness we have, and it is the form that affects us most directly, precisely because it comes with and through an experience. Which is why whoever is in power in a society also wants to control the arts — they mould consciousness.

Insight into the cultural function of the arts will help the public to understand why in contemporary European culture people seldom agree about which works or performances should be considered art. Only a few decades ago, when relatively small elites still decided about what mattered in culture, things were a lot easier. Today, we often live in more than one culture only (culture in the second sense discussed above!), and we have different kinds of experiences, which is one reason why we do not appreciate the same art works most of the time. And whenever this is the case — i.e. when we do appreciate the same artworks or performances — it might be because we share an experience, or because we have a similar history, live similar lives, share personality traits. More often, however, we disagree, and disputes about art are always a sensitive matter, precisely because our self-awareness, our self-image and our identity are at stake. The realization that people can have a very different cultural consciousness and a different view of life is of vital importance to democracy and to a true European culture. And this is an important argument in favour of art education as education in cultural awareness. Not only do students learn that life can be and has been reflected upon through imagination, and not only do they learn that this allows one to come to grips with it, but it is just as important that they also learn that one sometimes does not understand, that one cannot always understand, and that it is not always necessary to understand. And that this doesn't detract in the least from the right one has to one's own imagination — there is no final truth to imagination, only to imagining. To acknowledge that one does not

always understand someone or something, and to learn that this isn't a cause for panic is one of the main goals of art and cultural education, and fundamental to an open society.

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