

D.V. COORNHERT

ETHICS

THE ART OF LIVING WELL

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# ZEDEKVNST.

Dat is /

**W**ellebens kunste / vermits waar-  
heydes kennisse vanden Mensche / vande Zonden ende  
vande Deughden. Nu alder eerst beschreven  
in 't Neerlandtsch

Door

D. V. Coornhert.



t'AMSTERDAM,

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D.V. Coornhert

Ethics

The Art of Living Well

By Means of Knowledge of the  
Truth about Man, Sin, and Virtue  
Described for the First Time in Dutch

Translated, edited and introduced by  
Gerrit Voogt



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# Contents

*Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum*—An Editorial Explanation  
with Introductory Commentary · 9

Introduction · 23

## ETHICS, THE ART OF LIVING WELL – TRANSLATION

Dedication · 51

### BOOK I

#### THE PASSIONS

1. Living Well Is an Art Based on Following Correctly the Precepts of Virtue · 61
2. Of Man and the Superior Powers of His Soul · 68
3. The Inferior Powers of the Soul Known as Passions or Disturbances · 71
4. Whether the Passions of Man are Innate or Chosen · 75
5. The Difference between Inclination and Desire · 79
6. Concupiscence or Sexual Desire · 82
7. Love · 87
8. Desire · 93
9. The Distinction between Love and Desire · 98
10. Hatred, Aversion and the Distinction between These Two, and Illusion · 101
11. Hope · 106
12. Fear · 112
13. Gladness and Joyfulness · 121
14. Sorrow · 125
15. Wrathfulness · 136
16. Forbearance · 142

## BOOK II

## THE MEANS BY WHICH VIRTUE CAN BE ATTAINED

1. The Will · 149
2. Reason · 157
3. Deliberation · 163
4. Judgment · 168
5. Belief and Knowledge · 172
6. Conscience · 183

## BOOK III

## WISDOM

1. Virtue · 193
2. Sin · 207
3. The Division of Virtues · 218
4. The Division of Sins · 220
5. Wisdom · 223
6. Foolishness · 241

## BOOK IV

## JUSTICE

1. Justice in General · 255
2. Injustice in General · 259
3. True Religion · 263
4. False Religion · 268
5. Obedience or Submission · 270
6. Defiance · 275
7. Truth · 278
8. Falsehood · 290
9. Gratitude · 301
10. Ingratitude · 308
11. Generosity and Prodigality · 310
12. Avarice · 322
13. Friendship · 333
14. Feuding or Enmity · 347

BOOK V  
FORTITUDE

1. Fortitude · 355
2. Weakness · 367
3. Magnanimity and Trust · 374
4. Pusillanimity and Mistrust · 380
5. Equanimity · 385
6. Melancholy · 394
7. Patience · 399
8. Impatience · 413
9. Steadfastness and Constancy · 418
10. Inconstancy · 423

BOOK VI  
TEMPERANCE

1. Temperance · 431
2. Intemperance · 438
3. Pleasure · 441
4. Pain · 448
5. Continence and Incontinence · 453
6. Kindheartedness and Mercy · 461
7. Cruelty · 466
8. Humility · 471
9. Pride · 478

Appendix · 483

Index · 491

About the Author · 503

*Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum* · 505





*Bibliotheca Dissidentium*  
*Neerlandicorum*—An Editorial Explanation  
with Introductory Commentary

The *Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum* [BDN] is an initiative of the Coornhert Foundation. This foundation aims to make the sources of the religious, philosophical and literary non-conformism of the Low Countries, from the late Middle Ages up until our own time, accessible to a wider audience, both digitally and in print. The BDN comprises both textual editions (translations), and studies (monographs, congress and conference proceedings and dissertations). Authors who occupy a central position in this series' publications, either with their own text, or as the object of research, are expected to be, in some sense of the word, "non-conformists," "dissidents" or "freethinkers." The goal which the Coornhert Foundation strives towards with i.a. the BDN, is formulated in the foundation charter as: "the promotion of an ethical humanitarian attitude of tolerance which is inspired by examples of non-conformist attitudes in religion, philosophy and science from the past and the present."<sup>1</sup> It seemed only natural that a foundation with an objective such as this one would be named after Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590), and that its first publications, both digitally and in book form, would be works

1 In the preamble ("Considerans") of the foundation charter, name and aims of the foundation are clarified:

"The foundation has been named after the non-conformist Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590), a versatile author (playwright, theologian, philosopher, lawyer), engraver and publisher. A humanist scholar through self-study, Coornhert attempted to write for the 'common man' i.e. in the vernacular. In addition to his role in transmitting humanistic learning to a wider audience, his appearance also had a socio-political significance. In his capacity of advisor of William of Orange, he emerged as the ideologue of William's ideal of freedom of religion and acquired a reputation for his indefatigable efforts for religious tolerance, freedom of speech and the printing press. He moreover managed to circulate his moral pedagogical ideas and ideals through his activities as a literary man and engraver."

written by this author.<sup>2</sup> With the publication—in both an English and a Dutch translation—of Coornhert’s second great work, *Ethics. The Art of Living Well* from 1586, a long-harbored wish is finally fulfilled.

*The Art of Living Well as Religious Moral Instruction:  
A Suggestion to Define the Position of Coornhert’s  
Ethics. The Art of Living Well (1586)*

An editorial foreword is not the most appropriate place to publish an academic article, but it is an acceptable opportunity to make an—argued—suggestion for discussion and further research. This suggestion does not replace the translator’s introduction, but rather complements it, just like a bottom-up perspective and a top down-perspective on one and the same subject complement each other. The “philosophical” top-down perspective of my “suggestion” reveals other peculiarities than the bottom-up perspective of the historian. My argument consists of two parts. Both have their own individual focus, but they complement each other in the end. The first part defines my negative starting point—that which I rebel against: the reading of *Ethics* as a systematic, theoretical tract. The second delineates my positive starting point: a suggestion to situate *Ethics* in a tradition of religious moral education. In the process of elaborating on this situation, I will introduce a comparison between Coornhert and Cicero which can shed some light on the atypical nature of *Ethics*.

*Coornhert’s Ethics between Middle Ages and Renaissance:  
A Non-Existent Problem?*

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance are the two poles on either side of the field of tension in which Coornhert’s *Ethics* should be placed. What is medieval about *Ethics* is everything which is connected to Coornhert’s

- 2 In 2008, the Coornhert-website was launched via the Amsterdam University Library. The first publications to appear, simultaneously, in the BDN were a Dutch and an English translation of Coornhert’s *Synodus vander Conscientien Vryheydt* (1582): J. Gruppelaar, J.C. Bedaux en G. Verwey (eds.), D.V. Coornhert, *Synode over de gewetensvrijheid. Een nauwgezet onderzoek in de vergadering gehouden in het jaar 1582 te Vrijburch* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), and G. Voogt (ed.), D.V. Coornhert, *Synod on the Freedom of Conscience. A Thorough Examination during the Gathering Held in the Year 1582 in the City of Freetown* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

relationship with the Catholicism of his parents (rejected by him) and the German speculative mysticism of the *Theologia Deutsch* (which he greatly admired). What belongs to the Renaissance and humanism are, apart from his artistic and intellectual versatility, his reception of the classics (particularly the work of Cicero and Seneca), Italian literature (Boccaccio) and the rationalistic nature of his Spiritualism, which cannot be considered separately from the embedment of his work in the “Vernacular Rationalism” (R. Buys) of his time. Until recently, interpreters of *Ethics* distinguished themselves by emphasizing either the Medieval or the Renaissance pole.

This is not the place to discuss this complex issue in great detail.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I would like to draw attention to a recent reinterpretation of the concept of reason in the work of Coornhert which both J. Gruppelaar and R. Buys have highlighted in 2014 and which has ushered in a new round in the “conflit des interprétations” around Coornhert.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Buys: “Coornhert is convinced that human reason is part of the divine, is in fact a spark of divinity and as such a primary element of a higher cosmic order which transcends our human plane of existence. Coornhert is strange to the notion of a purely human, individual rationality, or more accurately: he explicitly condemns it as a lower form of reason, which is aimed at self-interest and which has detached itself from its original source. Only in that sense can Coornhert’s ethics be called rationalistic.”<sup>5</sup> In short: reason in Coornhert’s work is not only not autonomous but also not individual.

With this interpretation, an old problem in the Coornhert-exegesis makes its re-entrance: the issue of the relation between Christian orientation and Stoic legacy in Coornhert’s thinking. How can a form of reason which is not autonomous and not individual be compatible with the project of a perfectism which is utterly pointless without the assumption of the individuality of freedom, responsibility, doing good and sin, reason and charity? I think that we will have to acknowledge that Coornhert’s work harbors divergent philosophical onsets whose consequences

3 This issue consists of (1) the problem of the relation between rationalism and mysticism and (2) the problem of the relation between Christian and classical Stoic legacies in Coornhert’s work.

4 See J. Gruppelaar, ‘Perfectisme en onthechting. De wellevenskunst van Coornhert,’ in: J. Gruppelaar & J. Pieters, *‘Un certain Holandois.’ Coornhert en de vragen van zijn tijd* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), pp. 75–106; R. Buys, ‘In de ban van de “Duytsche Theologus.” Spiritualisme en Coornherts “redelijke” ethiek,’ in: *ibid.*, pp. 35–54.

5 R. Buys, in: *ibid.*, p. 54.

are not always easy to reconcile. In other words, we will have to accept that, from a philosophical/theological point of view, read as a “theoretical tract,” *Ethics* lacks a clear systematic unity, and is therefore inconsistent. The question is whether we should put so much emphasis on this theoretical imperfection and whether there is a possible explanation for this aspect of Coornhert’s *Ethics* in the light of which this lack of unity acquires another meaning and does not have to be explained away at all costs. This last option is mine. Although we encounter the same level of inconsistency in the work of some other contemporary authors in the genre related to *Ethics*, that of the so-called “ars vivendi et moriendi,” I chiefly base my choice on the following considerations.<sup>6</sup>

### *An Alternative Perspective*

*Ethics* is concerned with instructions for living well, or more precisely, with guidelines for a truly Christian way of life. Seen as such, it is a work of “moral instruction,” which can be placed in a tradition that stretches from Greek-Roman Antiquity to Coornhert’s own time. I will return to this later. In the title of his book, Coornhert speaks about the “art” of living well. This “art” is a translation of the Latin “ars,” which is, in turn, a translation of the Greek “technè.” Since Antiquity, the fundamental example of a *technè* has been the art of medicine. The medicine of Antiquity distinguished between “dietetics” (the theory of a healthy lifestyle) and “therapeutics” (the theory of the treatment of illnesses). Both concern a person’s physical well-being. Coornhert’s attention for human well-being bears a religious, Christian hallmark. Consequently, his “art of living well” or *Ethics* is concerned with the health and illness of the spiritual, i.e. the moral spiritual human. In his *Ethics* the treatment of the virtues and sins play a pivotal role. An “art of living well” à la Coornhert is therefore essentially an ethics, or to be more precise an ethics of virtue.<sup>7</sup> The type of rationality that is characteristic of such a “technè,” “ars” or art is that of “practical reason,” as it had

6 See D.W. Atkinson, *The English ars moriendi. Renaissance and Baroque. Studies and Texts* (New York [etc.]: Peter Lang, 1992).

7 Not the first ethics: this was produced by the Calvinist theologian Daneau, in response to whose ethics, in Latin, Coornhert might have conceived his own *Ethics*, but the first in a vernacular.

been represented in clinical medicine since classical Antiquity and was theoretically underpinned in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes to the theory of virtue, Coornhert continues a tradition which stems from the Middle Ages. I allude to the history of the Christian reception of the original, classical theory of virtues, especially the theory of the so-called cardinal virtues. This reception does not merely, or mainly, happen in the works of theologians and philosophers, but more particularly in works from religious (and also literary) circles; works in which, rather than the preoccupation with correct doctrine, the care of the spiritual welfare of its target audience—lay people—was vital. Preaching and pastoral care took priority. For an adequate execution of these practical tasks, theological or philosophical subtleties were of secondary importance. More valuable was practical assistance for everyday life, guidelines for a Christian religious practice of life, for an education that would make one a true Christian. In order to do this, it was sufficient to have a framework of virtues that should be pursued and sins that should be avoided.

It is the classical theory of virtue, the theory of the cardinal virtues in particular—the heart of the classical ethics of virtue—which laid the foundations for this framework. Starting with Plato, this theory would find its way to Roman authors such as Cicero and Seneca. A Christian reception of that classical legacy, which continued to build on its classical (Roman) examples, was to take place in the early Middle Ages, a reception both in the theology of that time and in the monastically and pastorally oriented branches of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> That history—from the fourth century until around 1500—has recently been mapped out. It takes us to the threshold of Coornhert's time.<sup>10</sup>

8 Cf. Albert R. Jonson & Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse Of Casuistry. A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1989 [1988]).

9 In accordance with the dichotomy of theological and monastic pastoral reception, two variants can be distinguished within the medieval tradition of virtue ethics: (1) the doctrinal, theological variant (in which the classical cardinal virtues of prudence, righteousness and moderation were combined with the scripturally documented "theological" virtues of faith, hope and love) and (2) the monastic ascetic variant which would increasingly gain importance in preaching and pastoral care, and which would be prominently reflected in medieval literature (Dante, Chaucer).

10 Jasmijn Bovendeert, *Kardinale deugden gekerstend. De vier kardinale deugden vanaf Ambrosius tot het jaar 1000* (diss. RU Nijmegen, 2007); Krijn Pansters, *De kardinale deugden in de Lage Landen, 1200–1500* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007 [also appeared as (doctoral) dissertations at Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen]).

Although there is a certain overlap between both versions—the doctrinal theological and the monastic pastoral—the virtue catalogues of both persuasions are organized differently. Humbleness, for instance, plays a secondary role in the doctrinal version, whereas the monastic pastoral traditions consider it the most important virtue, due to its importance as a remedy against the cardinal sin of pride.<sup>11</sup> This latter version is represented in Coornhert's *Ethics*. Admittedly, this consideration strengthens the interpretation of *Ethics* as a primarily medieval work, but negates the ambiguity of his project, for he is also a Renaissance author who does not neglect to highlight the importance of classical, pagan authors, Cicero and Seneca in particular, as the sources of his theory of virtue, and to emphasize the importance of rational self-knowledge and self-control, or moderation. At the very least, this also reinforces the impression that as author of *Ethics* Coornhert wants to be recognized as a Renaissance humanist. Meanwhile, the problem of the inconsistency of *Ethics* is not getting any smaller.

However, once we realize that this so-called *Uneinheitlichkeit* is part of the reason why Coornhert's *Ethics* is erroneously judged according to the criterion of a theoretical concept of science, a criterion which demands theoretical consistency, it becomes easier to attempt an alternative reading of his work with a clear conscience. When his work is assigned to the practically oriented, monastic pastoral tradition(s) of the Middle Ages which are characteristically geared to the “ars” model, an alternative reading of *Ethics* emerges. It is a reading that puts less weight on the desideratum of theoretical unity and logical consistency and more on the intended goal and target audience which Coornhert must have had in mind while he was writing his work. With this alternative reading, the contrast between the Spiritualistic and rationalistic interpretations of *Ethics* also loses its sharpness: Coornhert's “rationalism” of practical reason is not by definition irreconcilable with his “Spiritualistic” point of departure.

In a nutshell: the form of reason with which the moral pedagogical project of *Ethics* is concerned is not theoretical, demonstrative reason, it is not decontextualized reason as we know it from the later rationalism of Descartes and Spinoza, but rather practically oriented reason as we find it in Montaigne's *Essays*.<sup>12</sup> In short, it is the morally argumentative

11 Cf. Jean Porter, ‘Virtue ethics in the medieval period,’ in: Daniel C. Russell (ed.), *Companion to Virtue Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 70–91.

12 Cf. S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The Univer-