

## Philosophy and Science



### **Ton Lemaire** Philosopher of Earthly Spirituality

There are only a few great Dutch philosophers. After the Enlightenment and Erasmus, Spinoza and Grotius, that was it. Since then, partly because of the Netherlands' natural orientation towards the outside world, Dutch philosophy has turned unilaterally to other countries and has built up no real tradition of its own. One of the few modern Dutch thinkers who constitute an exception to the rule is Ton Lemaire (b.1941). His work covers a broad spectrum yet is still highly coherent, allowing him to develop his own theme without relying solely on references to other writers.

Lemaire is not just a philosopher, he is also an anthropologist and is profoundly concerned with the relationship between man and nature. His focus on 'primitive peoples' has led him to kindred thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Henry-David Thoreau, on whose work he is an expert.

A tribe, supposedly untouched by civilisation, discovered by an airplane that flew over the Amazon rainforest in 2008.

But Lemaire's own programme, as we can see in retrospect, is determined by a highly individualistic approach: who is man in his landscape?

Lemaire's *Philosophy of the landscape* (originally *Filosofie van het landschap*) was published in 1979. A bestseller in its genre, it is still being reprinted today. In fact the essay is an introduction to everything that was to follow. Lemaire's research focuses on the relationship between modern Western man and the landscape, a landscape Petrarch discovered in the fourteenth century as he enjoyed the view after climbing the Mont Ventoux. The landscape has since been exploited on a large scale by the modern tourist industry. Its discovery has meant that Western man has lost his

natural (in the sense of self-evident) connection with the land. A degree of objectivity has been introduced and with it a degree of alienation. After a personal crisis in the nineties Lemaire left the university and now lives in the French countryside.

In the much later work *With open senses, Nature, landscape, earth* (*Met open zinnen. Natuur, landschap, aarde*, 2002) Lemaire searches for a strategy that will allow man to return to his own land. He develops an extremely individual philosophy of the sensory affinity between man and earth. This affinity with the elements is the source of an earthly spirituality that, inspired by Nietzsche's Zarathustra, led Lemaire to the term 'spiritual naturalism'. In his major recent work on the darker sides of progress, *The Fall of Prometheus* (*De val van Prometheus*, 2010), he describes in minute detail how in the course of history, and particularly as a result of the Enlightenment, this spirituality has been forced further and further into the background. The economic growth scenario is not only exhausting the earth's resources but also the human spirit.

The study *On wings of the soul* (*Op vleugels van de ziel*, 2007), as original as it is scholarly, shows another side of Lemaire: the art historian. He charts what the variety of kinds of birds has meant for art, including the art of poetry. In this way he shows that biodiversity is of importance not only biologically but also culturally. The bond with earth and nature is a rich source of metaphor that also feeds the imagination. The loss of religion may have led to the demystification of the world, but the romantic and artistic bewitchment that comes from a certain destiny shared by man and nature has refused to let itself be eradicated. Lemaire himself accuses the monotheistic religions, especially, of being the greatest 'debunkers'.

Closely related to this vision is Lemaire's conviction that man has experienced a kind of ecological utopia which really did exist. Lemaire situates this in the Palaeolithic period, when homo sapiens was a hunter-gatherer. The struggle for daily existence was minimal, man must have been fairly healthy, there was no productivity or consumer pressure and weal and woe were fairly distributed. The bond between man and nature was experienced as magical. It is a utopia that pops

up all over his work. This primitive being is the being that still truly lives *in* his landscape. For Lemaire he is an allusion to the *Paradise Lost* motif. This was partly the source of inspiration for his book *The Indian in our consciousness* (*De indiaan in ons bewustzijn*, 1986), in which he depicts the way in which the culture of the original inhabitants of the American continent was represented by those who took over the country. But in *On the value of cultures* (*Over de waarden van culturen*, 1976) the full extent of his admiration for the first forms of human civilisation is also to be heard. From his self-chosen position of solitariness Lemaire continues to hold up the ideal of the hunter-gatherer to the urbanised Netherlands like a modern Zarathustra. And at the same time that gives rise to surprising new perspectives on the philosophy of culture.

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*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*