

## The Transcendental Critique Revisited and Revised

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### Preliminary Remarks

The greatest delight of my academic life was to encounter the work of Herman Dooyeweerd. An interest in philosophy had infected me at an early age and, as everyone who has contracted that disease knows, it is incurable. And right from its onset, my concern was always how to deal with philosophical issues from a Christian point of view. So I wrestled with such questions as: Is philosophy merely non-Christian theology? If not, just how should Christian belief relate to theories? To these questions and many more, I found Dooyeweerd's work to be an enormous help and guide. With respect to the issue as to how belief in God should impact theories, he was the only thinker I've ever encountered able to specify a genuine *tertium quid* between the two prevailing positions most Christians have taken on that issue for philosophy and science. The first position is to say that any theory that doesn't outright contradict revealed truth is a candidate for Christian acceptance. The other is to try to derive theories from scripture on the assumption that it contains truths for nearly every major academic discipline. Dooyeweerd's alternative position rejects the view that belief in God is walled off from the vast majority of theories as the first position allows, but also rejects the program of trying to derive the content of theories from scripture as is sought by the second.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he showed how belief in God can *regulate* all theories by requiring that nothing in the cosmos be regarded as that which produces everything else in the cosmos, on the ground that only the transcendent Creator holds that status.<sup>2</sup> And he produced a highly original ontology regulated by belief in God in exactly that way - an ontology I find to have greater explanatory power than any other, even including Aristotle's.<sup>3</sup>

Despite my appreciation of these accomplishments, in the article that follows I am forced to conclude that Dooyeweerd's project of analyzing the activity of theory making to show that it can't avoid religious control does not succeed. Though that project is initially well-conceived, it is not brought off. So I offer here an analysis of why

and where that project failed, *and a way to recover it*. Far from being hostile to Dooyeweerd's intentions, then, it is offered as a love gift to his legacy in gratitude for all I have received from it.

### The Idea of a Critique of Theory Making

Over the more than fifty years since the publication of Dooyeweerd's major opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*,<sup>4</sup> there has emerged a consensus concerning the two central projects of that work. One of those projects was what Dooyeweerd called a "transcendental critique" of theory making, and the other was the construction of a theory of reality. The critique was negative in its thrust, claiming to show why it's not possible to construct any theory in science or philosophy that is not regulated by some divinity belief or other. His theory of reality was regulated by belief in God, and for that reason was systematically non-reductionist. Stated baldly, the consensus is that the first of these projects failed while the second is a brilliant and impressive accomplishment that continues to be fruitful in provoking continued discussion, application, and development. The irony about this consensus is that Dooyeweerd himself thought the reverse was true! He once said to me: "All my theories may need to be altered or abandoned, but the transcendental critique is a permanent contribution to philosophy."<sup>5</sup> In what follows I will offer an assessment of that critique. I will first explain why I think Dooyeweerd's idea for a critique of theory making is sound and brilliantly conceived. Then I will state why, and in what sense, I agree with the consensus that the way he worked out that critique did not succeed. Finally, I will end by showing how pinpointing certain difficulties with his formulation of it can clear the way to reconstructing it so that it does succeed after all. In the end, then, I conclude he was right in maintaining that no theory can be religiously neutral and in holding that a critique of theory making can demonstrate that fact.<sup>6</sup>

I begin with some reminders of why Dooyeweerd thought such a critique possible. The main basis for that conviction lies in the teaching of scripture. Dooyeweerd followed the Reformers in understanding scripture to convey that humans are innately religious. So he held that all humans consciously or unconsciously regard something or other as divine, and that the divinity they believe in is either the true God or a false God-surrogate. Following Calvin's exposition of Romans 1, he therefore understood every theory that regards any part or aspect of the cosmos as divine to be a result of the Fall.

By reflecting belief in some false divinity, the contents of such theories are the results of turning “the truth about God into a lie.” They identify what the cosmos depends on by replacing God with something God created.

Moreover, Dooyeweerd combined this point with the biblical view of human nature which sees the unity and identity of every person as centered in the human *heart*. Far from using “heart” to connote feelings as opposed to intellect (as is common in contemporary speech), Bible writers used the term to denote the central unity of the self including will, intellect, emotion, dispositions, talents, and all else that makes up a human. So Dooyeweerd took it as impossible that the religious commitment of the heart could fail to impact the whole of life - theories included.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that he refuses to see theoretical work as religiously neutral, but takes it instead to be religiously *directed*.<sup>8</sup>

These points are the basis for his examination of the theory making process on the assumption that it should be possible to see just *how* one or another religious belief regulates any hypothesis. In other words, he was convinced by scriptural teaching that if all of life is directed by belief in either the true God or some other divinity, then there should be ways theories exhibit that regulatory influence. And it is because such religious regulation necessarily attaches to *every* theory of philosophy and science, that Dooyeweerd used the term “transcendental” (necessary and universally applicable) to describe the critique that exposes it.

Of course, there was a tradition that had long used that term as the proper starting place for philosophy, namely, the legacy of Kant. And given his own early immersion in that tradition, it is not surprising that Dooyeweerd saw his critique of theory making as parallel to Kant’s critique of experience and so used the same term to denote it. That decision has, however, produced the unhappy result of misleading many to presume (even before reading him) that both his project of critique and his theories are essentially Kantian, when in fact his ontology and its consequences for epistemology could hardly be more dissimilar from the position of Kant.

## The Move Away from Kant

The first difference from Kant which is relevant here is the very fact that Dooyeweerd applied the project of critique to theories while Kant failed to do so. By failing to do that, Dooyeweerd points out, Kant remained dogmatic in the midst of constructing a critique that was intended to oppose all dogmatism. Kant, says Dooyeweerd, wanted to expose the universal and necessary conditions for experience, and offered a theory of what those are. But he did so without ever asking, in turn, for the conditions that are universal and necessary to making a theory.<sup>9</sup> In that way Kant was dogmatic rather than “critical” with respect to his own theory. Dooyeweerd also makes clear that the theory of experience Kant postulated was largely shaped by Hume’s phenomenalism. It was for that reason Kant accorded a privileged status to a number of beliefs that were in fact hypotheses whose only justification was that they outflanked Hume.

By contrast, Dooyeweerd began his critique of theory making with a *description of the activity and role of abstraction in theory making*. In this way he avoided both the need to postulate hypotheses and the need to claim a privileged status for any alleged philosophical axioms. Instead, his critique sought to examine the inner “structure” of theory making, focusing on the abstractive *activity* of the thinker as what is truly transcendental (necessary and universal) to all theory making. And, finally, he based the correctness of his description of that activity on “the thinker’s own self-reflection” rather than on arguments. The resulting critique is not, therefore, a *theory* about theories. As he said to me: “If the critique itself were just another theory, then it could not be a critique of all theory making.” Rather than being just one more hypothesis, his description of the role of abstraction provides a standard whereby any theory may be judged, namely, it must be compatible with the very activity required to produce it. Finally, Dooyeweerd included in his description of abstraction a description of its pre-abstractive objects. And that description, too, eschewed all hypotheses. For all these reasons, he called his approach “transcendental empirical” in distinction from Kant’s transcendental idealism. I find each of these points to be a vast and important advance over Kant, and to reflect a truly non-dogmatic attitude even if, in the end, not every Kantian element was successfully exorcised from his critique.

It should be obvious even now that the cogency of his critique rests entirely upon the accuracy of the descriptions he offered, especially of the act of abstraction and its role in theory making. Dooyeweerd saw that action as a relation, of course, a relation between the knowing subject and the object to be known. So he described it in three ways: from the side of what gets abstracted, from the side of the thinker who does the abstracting, and from the side of the relation between them. For the sake of clarity, I'm going to conduct my examination by confining myself first to what gets abstracted, then proceed to examine the subject doing the abstracting, and only then focus on his account of their relation. Dooyeweerd himself did not do that, but constantly mixed his account by going back and forth between all three sides. But parsing his description in this way will, I think, lend greater clarity as to what in his account was right and what was not. For once we see what went wrong with his account of the abstractum, it will be easy to notice how that same mistake is repeated in his account of what goes on in performing abstraction, and how together they led to a distorted account of the relation between them.

### A Summary of the Critique

With respect to abstracting from a concrete object, Dooyeweerd's account can be summed up in three statements: 1) abstraction is unavoidable in theory making; 2) abstraction introduces a new and artificial relationship into our experience of any subject-matter abstracted (a relationship not found in pre-theoretical experience but added to it); 3) the isolation of an abstractum in thought can never show it to have independent existence in reality. Let's consider them in that order.

The first statement may be seen as a claim about abstraction rather than a description of it. As such it is not defended at length but is taken for granted – as it had been by almost everyone since Aristotle. Should anyone care to deny it, we only need to ask for an example of a scientific or philosophical theory which did not abstract any property or law, nor employ any abstract concepts in either its hypotheses or their justification.<sup>10</sup> Since it seems obvious that there is no way any theory of philosophy or science could do that, I think it uncontroversial to accept this point until and unless someone can produce a counterexample.

The second statement is a description of the central characteristic of the action of abstracting, namely, that it is the action of mentally singling out one element from among many elements which are found together in a concrete object of consciousness. In other words, abstraction introduces a separation between the abstractum and whatever it has been abstracted from. This much, too, seems to me correct in the way I've just stated it. But as we shall see, it also contains a fateful ambiguity that led Dooyeweerd to a confusion that in turn led to a serious mistake.

The third statement is more complex because to grasp its significance one must first understand Dooyeweerd's definition of "religion". Religion, he says, is belief in something as the Absolute Origin of everything else. In this expression he is using "absolute" in an ontic sense to connote that which exists apart from (is independent of) everything else. It is thus a synonym for "self-existent."<sup>11</sup> Here, again, he is echoing the theology of the Reformers, especially Calvin, who said:

“...that from which all other things derive their origin must necessarily be self-existent and eternal.” (*Inst. I, v, 7*)

For this reason, any belief that a part or all of the cosmos is self-existent is therefore just as much a religious belief as is belief in God. Whereas biblical theism believes in a Creator who transcends the cosmos, naturalism believes the divine to be an immanent part of the cosmos or to be the cosmos as a whole (the older term for such naturalist beliefs is "paganism"). But whether the divine is thought to be transcendent or immanent, Dooyeweerd holds, all divinity beliefs are incapable of being justified in the ways theories are and are thus not hypotheses. So for him the two main characteristics of religious beliefs are: 1) they all regard something as the self-existent origin of everything else, and 2) they are all believed on the basis of experience rather than any sort of theoretical justification or proof.

With these clarifications, claim 3) can now be summarized as follows: every theory that takes some part or aspect of the cosmos to have independent reality is thereby regulated by a pagan (or naturalist) divinity belief, since regarding anything as absolute is the same as regarding it as divine. Moreover, in so far as that belief is presented not as a religious belief but as a hypothesis, it is then guilty of an egregious

error relative to the very process of thought required to form it. This is because it has abstracted some aspect of the cosmos and proceeded to take its isolation in *thought* to be equivalent to its independence in *reality* (N.C. 1, 39-40, 43-44; 2, 431-434). This inference from what is separable in thought to what exists independently in reality is, of course, a howling *non sequitur*. It simply doesn't follow that if we can think of something apart from everything else it can – let alone *must* – exist that way. Nevertheless, says Dooyeweerd, every western theory of reality not wholly regulated by belief in God has done exactly that. They have all taken some aspect of the cosmos as qualifying the nature of the reality on which the rest of the cosmos depends.

So far my sketch of this critique has been pretty general, so at this point it may be well to apply it to a specific theory in order to make clear how it's supposed to work. Let's take the example of philosophical materialism. This theory of reality says that everything in the cosmos is either: 1) exclusively physical or 2) produced by something exclusively physical. In order to make that claim, says Dooyeweerd, one must first abstract the physical kind of properties and laws from all the other kinds we experience. In our pre-abstractive, everyday experience we do find that things exhibit physical characteristics, of course. A thing may be heavy, solid, and show itself governed by gravity, for example. But the same thing will also exhibit many other kinds of properties and laws. It will have some numerical quantity, a spatial shape and size, and a sensory color and feel. It will also be biotically safe or dangerous, logically distinguishable from other things, linguistically referable, and able to be valued in a number of ways. (Such basic kinds of properties-and-laws were called "aspects" or "modalities" of experience by Dooyeweerd.)

For the theory of materialism to get started, then, the *physical* aspect must be singled out and mentally separated from both the concrete things that exhibit it and from the other aspects they exhibit. Only then can the theory proceed to claim either that everything whatever is exclusively physical, or that everything that is non-physical is produced by exclusively physical realities. But no matter which version a materialist holds, he thereby regards some exclusively physical reality (or realities) as having independent existence. The exclusively physical is thus regarded as Absolute – i.e., divine - because it's either all there is (so that there's nothing for it to depend on) or because it produces everything else. Dooyeweerd's critique applies to this theory by

pointing to the mistake mentioned earlier: it mentally separates the physical aspect from all the other experienced kinds of properties and laws, and then takes its separation in thought to show it has independence (self-existence) in reality. He puts it this way:

Theoretical thought has a typical antithetical attitude in all its positive forms. Here we oppose the logical... function of our real act of thought to the non-logical aspects of our temporal experience...the aspect which is opposed to the logical is distinguished...from the remaining aspects. Consequently if we designate the opposed aspect by the symbol "x" and the remaining aspects by the symbol "y", then "x" will also stand in antithetic relation to "y".

This theoretic antithesis does not correspond to the structure of empirical reality. (*N.C.* 1, 39, 40)

### The Critique as to its Object Side

To emphasize this difference introduced by abstraction, and so as to be clear about what is being discussed at any time, Dooyeweerd introduces the German term for object - "Gegenstand" - to denote an abstracted object of thought and retains the English term "object" for what is experienced without having been dissected by abstraction. As I am concentrating only on the *Gegenstand* side of this account for now, what is important in the quote above is that it describes abstraction as introducing a separation into our knowledge of its object that is not experienced without abstraction. To that he adds that the separation is the product of our activity.

Two quick comments are in order. First, notice that if this critique succeeds it does so with respect to any other kinds of properties and laws, not just the physical which is my example. So theories that have claimed the nature of ultimate reality is numerical (Pythagoreans), or spatial (Wheeler), or sensory (Hume & Mach), are equally undercut by it. So are theories that try to interpret the nature of Absolute reality as identified by two aspects rather than only one. For in that case, two aspects are isolated and taken to be the nature of two independent realities, and the experienced cosmos is



taken to be the result of their combination or interaction. Such metaphysical dualisms therefore make the same mistake twice rather than only once (think here of the form/matter duality of Plato and Aristotle, the mind/body duality of Descartes, or the logical/sensory duality of Kant).

The second comment is a reminder of a point I already made, which I will now put another way. If the advocates of such theories were to admit that their candidates for the ultimate nature of reality were not theoretical hypotheses but religious beliefs about what is Absolute (divine), and if they were to admit that they have no justification for them beyond experiencing them as having independent reality, then the point of this critique would have already been conceded. The critique aims neither at establishing which idea of the Absolute is right nor which theory of reality is true; its aim is to expose the *religious nature* of every belief in something as self-existent, and that some such belief is unavoidable in any theory of reality. It does this by combining the point that the essential characteristic of divinity as self-existence, with the point that every belief in any abstracted candidate for divinity is unjustifiable in the ways theories are justified, because otherwise the belief rests on confusing isolation in thought with self-existence in reality. In this way, Dooyeweerd saw his critique as effectively challenging the notion that theoretical thinking is autonomous. Theory making fails to be autonomous because no theory can fail to be controlled by one or another non-justifiable religious belief.

At this point you might feel like asking how this critique, even if correct, is supposed to impact *all* theories. Up till now it's only been applied to theories of reality so it's not clear how what has been said can apply to, say, theories about mathematical axioms, mental stress, psychological disorders, or economic syndromes. Even if theories of reality are regulated by some religious belief or other, how would that regulation spread to all other sorts of theories? Dooyeweerd's answer is to argue that every theory that is not a theory of reality includes or presupposes an ontology all the same. This is because no theory can avoid assumptions about how the aspect comprising the domain of its investigation connects to the other aspects of (created) reality. Thus the case he makes for the religious control of all theories is in two steps: first, every theory of reality is regulated by whatever divinity belief (ground motive) it affirms or presupposes; second, all other theories are regulated in turn by some view of how the various aspects of the cosmos hang together - even if that view remains an unconscious presupposition.

Thus the critique applies directly to theories of reality and extends indirectly to all other theories. The purpose of showing this to be the case is to clear the way for his explicitly Christian (theistic) theory of reality. For, if correct, his critique demonstrates that an explicitly theistic theory is not doing anything different from what all other theories are doing. All alike are regulated by some divinity belief, so a Christian ontology is not “sectarian” or biased in a way that other theories are not. By showing that religious neutrality is a myth, and that all theories of reality are religiously regulated, his critique aims to level the playing field and pave the way for his own ontology which is non-reductionist because it is regulated by belief in God.

### A More Detailed Examination of the Critique Thus Far

The remainder of this paper will not be concerned with Dooyeweerd’s case for the claim that all other theories are regulated by whatever view of reality they presuppose. I think that’s exactly right, but it’s beyond the scope of our concern here. Therefore in what follows I will only be speaking of whether his critique succeeds for all theories of reality. To see why I think it does not, we must look more closely at his account of abstraction. Granted it does not propose any hypotheses; but is it both accurate and adequate? Dooyeweerd formulates his description of the basic conditions for theory making as answers to a series of questions concerning abstraction. Referring to the abstract mode of thinking as the “theoretical attitude of thought”, he says:

The first transcendental basic problem with which we are confronted is exactly the theoretical “Gegenstand relation”:

We can formulate this problem as follows: *What do we abstract in the antithetic attitude of theoretic thought from the structures of empirical reality as these structures are given in naïve experience? And how is this abstraction possible? (N.C. 1, 41)*

In the subsequent pages (42, 43), the answer Dooyeweerd gives to the first of the italicized questions is that we abstract “aspects” of experience - basic *kinds* of properties-and-laws such as quantitative, spatial, kinematic, physical, biotic, sensory, logical, historical, linguistic, social, economic, aesthetical, juridical, ethical, and pistical.<sup>12</sup> It is from among such aspects that pagan-based theories of reality have selected their

choices for the nature of the absolute origin of the rest of the cosmos. Here's the same point put another way: most theories of reality have attempted to explain the connectedness between aspects by abstracting one or another of them and proclaiming that choice to be the nature of the independent reality that is either all there is or is what produces the rest of the cosmos. In either case, the connectedness is said to have the nature of whatever aspect was chosen: quantitative, or spatial, or physical, etc. The connectedness is thus either explained away by claiming there really are no distinct aspects to be related, or it's explained by arguing that realities whose nature is exclusively aspect X *produce* – and thus connect - all other realities and all their other aspects. But whatever aspect is chosen for that explanatory role is thereby deified since it is regarded as the nature of the self-existent, ultimate, reality on which all else depends. And so long as that is taken to be some aspect of the cosmos itself, it amounts to a pagan religious belief. That is why Dooyeweerd holds that it is pagan religious commitments that are

... the source of all *-isms* in the theoretical image of reality. The attempt must constantly be made to reduce all other aspects to mere modalities of the absolutized one. These *-isms* play their confusing role in the different branches of science as well as in philosophy. (*N.C.* 1, 46)

The theoretically abstracted modal aspect<sup>13</sup> which is chosen as the basic denominator for all the others or for part of them, is torn out of the intermodal coherence of meaning of temporal reality. It is treated as independent and elevated to the status of an *Arche* [Origin] which transcends meaning. (*N.C.* 1, 103)

This is what Dooyeweerd means by theories of reality being regulated or driven by some version of pagan religious belief. For no matter which aspect is chosen for this role, it reflects a prior commitment to the effect that there is no reality over and above the cosmos. That is why it assumes there must be some part of the cosmos (a part whose nature is qualified by one or another of its aspects) that is the self-existent Origin of all else.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, he maintains, a theist should hold that only the transcendent Creator

is self-existent and that everything in the cosmos has been created, and is sustained and connected by, God (Col. 1: 17). That is why he highlighted the importance of the religious standpoint of the thinker in his phrasing of the second basic question for a critique of theory making:

*From what standpoint can we reunite synthetically the logical and the non-logical aspects of experience which were set apart in opposition to each another in the theoretic antithesis? (N.C. 1, 45)*

This particular formulation emphasizes the need for an account of the relation of the logical aspect of thought (of the thinking subject) with some non-logical aspect of its abstractum (Gegenstand). But since I'm focusing only on the Gegenstand side of this relation for now, it's significant that other of his formulations make clear that he saw this question as equally applicable to each side of the relation. Recall that we already saw this in an earlier quote that said, in part:

...if we designate the opposed [abstracted] aspect by the symbol "x" and the remaining aspects by the symbol "y", then "x" will ...stand in antithetical relation to "y". (N.C. 1, 40)

### A Preliminary Assessment

Now a great deal of what Dooyeweerd says in connection with these two basic questions seems to me to be on the mark. I agree with him that western theories of reality have engaged in abstracting various aspects of experience and conferring on them the status of being the nature of the reality that produces all else. And I agree that, from a Christian Theistic point of view, nothing in the cosmos should be given that status since it belongs only to God. Moreover, it surely doesn't follow from the fact that we can abstract an aspect that it therefore has independent existence.

Nevertheless, there is one thing about this account I find troubling, while yet another sounds to me dead wrong.

First, as to what is troubling. While I agree that western theories of reality are guilty of one part of Dooyeweerd's accusation, namely, of abstracting one or more aspects and elevating them to divine status, it seems clear to me that not all of them are guilty of the other part of his accusation. That is, not all have claimed it is the mental isolation of their candidate for divinity that is the ground for claiming it has independent existence. To be sure, there are theorists that have done precisely that: Aristotle and Descartes, for example.<sup>15</sup> But it is easy to think of many that have not done so, and who would fully agree that any such claim is a logical faux pas. The materialist J.J.C. Smart, for example, rested his exclusivist physicalism on the claim that the only or best explanation for anything whatever always has physical terms for its primitive terms and physical laws for its primitive laws. On that ground he argued that there actually are no other aspects to reality.<sup>16</sup> And while Dooyeweerd is surely right in opposing that position, it is nevertheless not true that Smart held his view on the basis of the mistaken inference that Dooyeweerd says is true of those who absolutize an aspect. Instead, his ontology was based on the (alleged) explanatory superiority of his theory, and not at all on the logical non-sequitur Dooyeweerd rightly rejected. Nor has any pragmatist I've ever read committed that error either; and those are not the only examples. The fact is I can't think of a single non-Christian philosopher from the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present who hasn't based his or her theory on a claim of explanatory superiority rather than on the mistake Dooyeweerd identified as rendering unjustifiable any absolutization of an aspect.

The reason this is troubling is that - no matter what else may be right about the critique as Dooyeweerd presented it – *this part of it is not transcendental*. Abstraction in theory making surely seems to be universal and unavoidable, yes; but confusing isolation in thought with independence in reality is not. So as it stands, this part of Dooyeweerd's critique has failed to show that any divinity belief that occurs in a theory is unjustifiable because it rests on the patent logical confusion he identified. This point is not fatal to his entire project, of course. His definition of religious belief as belief in something as self-existent is unaffected by it, as is his position that no ontology can avoid being regulated by one or another such belief. But his exposure of the falsity of any inference from mental isolation to real independence is not universal and thus is not a transcendental criticism of non-Christian ontologies. For that reason, his critique fails to show that all by itself the unavoidability of abstraction assures that every divinity belief

is a genuinely *religious* commitment rather than a hypothesis; it fails to show this because it fails to show that such beliefs are incapable of justification in the way theories are justified.

What is even more serious, however, is yet another part of the critique that strikes me as dead wrong. The part I'm speaking of now is not the basic notion that abstraction is the mental separation of a particular element from a wider context of experience, such that we think of what has been separated as unconnected to what it has been separated from (Dooyeweerd also spoke of this as "isolating" the abstractum: *N.C.* 2, 430 – 433, 467, 470, 473, 479, e.g.). That much compares favorably with both the entire tradition of western philosophy and with my own self-reflection. Nor is my problem with the part of the description in which he says that what we isolate *from* are the individual concrete objects of experience taken as wholes (*N.C.* 1, 41, 42).<sup>17</sup> The difficulty, as I see it, is that while my self-reflection confirms that abstracting can isolate a property, law, or an entire aspectual kind of them *from the concrete entities that exhibit it*, it also reveals that I can never completely isolate a property, law, or entire kind of them *from one another*. I simply cannot think of any abstraction as unconnected to every other abstraction. Yet in his formulation of the second basic problem for a critique of theory making, Dooyeweerd slides from one of these into the other. Initially he speaks about abstracting aspects from the "structures" (things, events, states of affairs, persons, social communities, etc.) we encounter in experience. But he then immediately assumes that if an aspect has been isolated from every concrete entity that exhibits it, it has also been isolated from every other aspect. Notice that in the last quote cited (*N.C.* 1, 40) he says that if the abstracted aspect is represented by x, then its abstraction puts it into an "antithetical relation" with respect to *all the other aspects* rather than only with respect to the remainder of the concrete thing(s) from which it has been isolated. And elsewhere he explicitly says that theoretical analysis opposes abstractions "to the logical function of our thought and to each other..."<sup>18</sup>

It is this conflation of 1) isolation-from-concrete-things with 2) isolation-from-all-other-aspects which is fatal to the critique. For there is, I think, a powerful reason to suppose that even though 1) is essential to theory making 2) *cannot be done at all*. My claim is that the isolation of properties, laws, and entire aspects from one another is a mental impossibility. If my argument for that is correct, and the mutual isolation of aspects is impossible to perform, then Dooyeweerd's formulation of the second basic

question concerning the possibility of theory making is completely misstated. It cannot be the problem of how to synthesize aspects that have been put into a mutual “dis-stasis” (*N.C.* 2, 469) by being “set asunder” (*N.C.* 1, 45). It cannot be the problem of how to reconnect any one aspect with the others after it has been “torn out of” its “coherence” with them (*N.C.* 1, 103). For if isolating properties, laws, and aspects from all other properties, laws and aspects is truly impossible, the problem cannot be how to put Humpty together again; we never got Humpty apart in the first place.

The amazing thing about this point is that Dooyeweerd himself seems – intermittently - to recognize it often! Despite using such phrases for abstracted aspects as “set apart”, “dis-stasis”, “set asunder”, “torn from their coherence”, “theoretical discontinuity”, and “isolated”, he also says:

...even when theoretically abstracted, the... structure of the... aspect x which is made into a “Gegenstand” continues to express its coherence (of meaning) with the aspects y which have not been chosen as the field of inquiry. (*N.C.* 1, 40)

Which is diametrically opposed to what he says 63 pages later when he returns to the same topic:

The theoretically abstracted...aspect which is chosen as the basic denominator for all the others or for part of them, is torn out of the inter-modal coherence of meaning of temporal reality. (*N.C.* 1, 103)

Moreover, the position expressed in the first of these quotes (from p.40) is the same as that with which he begins the *New Critique*. It opens with these words:

If I consider reality as it is given in the naïve pre-theoretical experience, and then confront it with a theoretical analysis through which reality appears split up into various modal aspects then the first thing that strikes me, is the original *indissoluble interrelation* among these aspects... A[n] indis-

soluble inner coherence binds the numerical to the spatial aspect, the latter to the aspect of...movement...In this ... cosmic coherence no single aspect stands by itself; every one refers within and beyond itself to all the others.<sup>19</sup>

So which is it? Does abstraction tear apart properties, laws, and entire kinds of them (aspects) that characterize the concrete objects of our experience? Does it succeed in isolating aspects in the sense of setting them in such opposition that a fundamental problem for theory making is to say how they can be reconnected? Or is it the case that we can only *distinguish* them without ever actually being able to think of them apart from all others? I have already said where I come down on this issue. But before giving my argument, let me be clearer about the difference I just introduced between distinguishing and abstracting.

### Distinction and Abstraction

If a friend buys a new car and invites me to see it, there are a number of its properties I'll surely take note of. Its color, body shape, weight, the feel of its ride, its beauty of design, and its price are sure to get my attention. And it is precisely directing my attention that allows me to distinguish those properties from one another and from the car that exhibits them. Shifting the focus of my attention from one to another, I discriminate each from the others in conformity with the logical laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle. That is, for any characteristic of a concrete thing, it is identical with itself ( $P = P$ ), cannot be itself and not itself at the same time  $\sim (P \ \& \ \sim P)$ , and is either  $P$  or not  $P$  ( $P \vee \sim P$ ). Nothing about such distinguishing requires that any of its properties be thought of in isolation from the car, however. Rather, each is *distinguished* and thought of as a  $P$  of the car.

The same thing happens when I distinguish one whole concrete thing from another. It is distinguished by an act of thought that is guided by the logical axioms just mentioned, whether or not I employ those axioms consciously, and whether or not they are employed by someone who has never explicitly articulated them. But I cannot *isolate* a concrete individual whole from all other concrete individuals no matter how hard I try. Both the distinguishing of individual wholes and of individual properties take place at the



level of thought Dooyeweerd called “pre-theoretical” and which I am here calling “pre-abstractive.”

By contrast, in the abstract mode of thought we can intensify the focus of our attention<sup>20</sup> and actually isolate properties from the car, thinking of them apart from it or any other concrete thing that could possess them. Take as an example the physical property of weight. We can think of it apart from the car or any other concrete thing that has it. We can also do the same with other physical properties such as mass, velocity, and momentum, e.g. (This is the same sense of “abstract” that we use when we speak of abstract shapes in geometry and deal with them apart from any concrete thing that exhibits them.) Moreover, we can not only abstract properties from any and every concrete thing that has them, but doing so allows us to notice relations between the abstracted properties. So, for example, we can notice that the relation  $\text{momentum} = (\text{mass} \times \text{velocity})$  holds among those properties, and thus also think of that relation apart from any thing or event that conforms to it. In fact, it is because those properties are conceived in abstraction, that their relation can be taken to hold among them no matter what concrete things and events they occur in. It is in this way that we grasp the relation as nomological, and attempt to formulate it in a law statement. In other words, it is precisely because the properties are conceived in abstraction from every concrete thing that the laws the properties conform to are also conceived abstractly, and thus apply to all the concrete things and events in which those properties occur.

It should now be clear why abstractively isolating is not the same as merely distinguishing. We can distinguish a thing from a thing, a property from a thing, and a property from a property, without isolating any of them. In fact, such distinguishing is a pre-condition for abstraction, for *we cannot isolate a property, law, or entire aspect unless we have first distinguished it*. Moreover, not only can we distinguish without isolating, but it must be kept in mind that the isolation of any abstractum from the concrete things that exhibit it thereby becomes a new element *added to* our non-abstractive experience; it does not replace it.<sup>21</sup> The same point put another way is that we continue to experience distinguished concrete data in the continuity of their distinguished properties and aspects even while we abstract and examine a particular property or aspect in isolation from all concrete data.

So one part of the confusion in his development of the critique, is that Dooyeweerd failed to differentiate between mere distinguishing and abstracting.<sup>22</sup> And that has led to the other part, in which he has confused abstraction which succeeds in isolating aspects from concrete data, with what can only be distinguishing - rather than isolating - abstracta. Both distinguishing and abstracting are unavoidable and universal pre-conditions for theory making, but mistaking the latter for the former leads to the false problem of how to reunite (synthesize) separated aspects.

### Why the Mutual Isolation of Abstracta is Impossible

Earlier, when I tried to give an idea of how my argument would proceed, I claimed that while we can *distinguish* properties, laws, and entire aspects from one another, we cannot - however so hard we try – abstractively pry them apart from one another in any sense strong enough to require posing their reunification as a fundamental problem for philosophy. So let me now be clearer about that claim. What I propose to show is that every attempt to isolate abstracta from one another results in the immediate, complete, and incurable destruction of any idea of what we are attempting to isolate. To see why this is so, we do not need an abstruse argument involving complex logical or epistemological moves. Rather, the point is one we can all confirm in our own self-reflection by a simple operation of thought which is called in science a “thought experiment”. The experiment is to try to show my claim is false by actually attempting to frame the idea of any single property, law, or any entire aspect in isolation from all others. I now ask you to perform that experiment.<sup>23</sup>

Let’s start with the abstracted property of weight. To begin the experiment, you must think of this property apart from any concrete thing that exhibits it, which I’m saying can indeed be done. Then you must try to think of it in the way Dooyeweerd envisions, as abstractively separated from all other properties. So the next step is to strip from your idea of weight every connection to quantity and to spatial location (this means you are now trying to think of weight that has no amount and is nowhere). Next strip away from it every connection to properties and laws of sensation so that it is *in principle* not perceivable, and follow that up by disconnecting it from every property and law of logic so that it is not distinguishable from anything other than itself. Finally, you must also try

to isolate it from every linguistic property and law with the result that it can't be thought or spoken of in language.

Now tell me what you have left.

What is left of your idea weight? What is weight that has no quantity, is nowhere, has no connection to perception, is not distinguishable from anything else, and is not able to be thought of or referred to in language? Surely the answer is that we have no such idea. The idea of weight has evaporated before our minds.

It should be obvious that we get the same result no matter what property we perform the experiment upon, and that the same result accrues if we perform the experiment with a law rather than a property. What, for instance, is left of the law mentioned above relating mass, momentum, and velocity once the same experiment is performed? For not only is every property that is a member of the law-relation inconceivable in isolation from properties of other aspects, so is the law. What is this law if it cannot be quantified, holds nowhere, is not logically distinguishable from anything else, and cannot be expressed in language? Moreover, the same is true for the entire physical aspect. What is left of the meaning of "physical" when we perform the same experiment? Can we say what it means for anything to be physical if it cannot be: counted, somewhere, distinguishable from the non-physical, connected to perception, and able to be spoken of? Isn't it clear that any idea of what it is to be "physical" must include such connections to non-physical aspects such that its properties are countable, have location, are logically distinguishable, and are linguistically referable? Of course, the same holds for sensory properties, laws, and the entire sensory aspect. What is left of, say, the sensory property of red after we perform our thought experiment? Have we any idea of red that has no quantity, no spatial extension, cannot be logically distinguished from anything non-red, and cannot be referred to in language? Ditto for the entire sensory aspect. Or, again, try the experiment on numbers. What is a quantity that is not distinguishable from any other, is nowhere, and is not able to be thought or spoken of in language?

The point of the experiment is that it shows it is impossible for us to so much as frame the idea of any abstracted property or entire aspect apart from all other properties

or aspects. Just as we can say the words “square circle” but have no idea what they could refer to, so too we can say the words “exclusively physical” or “exclusively sensory” or “exclusively logical”, but have no idea whatever to go with those words. The upshot is that any theory proposing such entities (literally) doesn’t know what it’s talking about.

### The Critique as to its Subject Side

Unfortunately, Dooyeweerd made claims about isolated abstracta on the subject-side of theoretical thinking that are almost identical to the ones he made about abstracta on the Gegenstand-side. In fact, where they differ at all, the claims made about the subject side are even worse. Some of these difficulties have been made very clear by Prof. D. F. M. Strauss in his article “An Analysis of the Structure of Analysis” (*P.R.* 1984, 48 (1984) pp. 35-56). Strauss points out that Dooyeweerd insists over and over that when we engage in abstraction we place the *logical aspect* of our thought over against whatever non-logical aspect we want to abstract. He notes Dooyeweerd’s emphasis that it is not on the full concrete act of thought that places the logical over against its intended object, but only the isolated logical aspect of that act. This is compounded when Dooyeweerd also maintains that every object of abstraction is non-logical so that he sees as an important problem the question of how the logical and non-logical can be connected so as to make theoretical concepts possible. Against this account, Strauss raises a number of salient objections but I will mention only two here. The first is that it makes no sense to speak of the *logical aspect* as accomplishing the abstraction of anything. Aspects, as such, do nothing. It could only be the entire, concrete act of thought that abstracts. Such an act is surely *led* by (guided primarily by) logical laws, but that doesn’t make it exclusively logical. The second is that by insisting that the resulting Gegenstand relation is between the logical aspect of thought and some non-logical aspect to be abstracted, Dooyeweerd has made the abstraction of the logical aspect itself impossible. Strauss also shows how these points are at odds with Dooyeweerd’s own ontology, and that at points Dooyeweerd is blatantly inconsistent with this description of the subject side of theoretical thinking. For example, he points to *N.C.* 2, 390 and 471-2 where Dooyeweerd speaks of the logical aspect of the object side of reality! Dooyeweerd had earlier disagreed with some of these criticisms of Strauss.<sup>24</sup> And although I think Strauss’ objections were spot on, I do not want to go into their debate in

detail here. My reason for bypassing it is that I want to stay focused on the more basic issue of Dooyeweerd's insistence that abstraction sets aspects apart in an antithesis that needs to be re-synthesized since that is assumed by the points Strauss objected to. That is, I want to stay focused on whether Dooyeweerd ascribes to abstraction a result I claim to be a transcendental (mental) impossibility. For if he was wrong about that, then Strauss' objections are doubly vindicated.

The reason it seems to me that Dooyeweerd was wrong on this point is that the same experiment in thought which showed non-logical aspects disappear before our minds when we attempt to isolate them, can be repeated with the same result when performed upon the logical aspect. What is left of the logical aspect if we attempt to think of it as isolated from the aspects of quantity (no existential quantifiers or set members), space (no domain for quantifiers or extension for terms), kinematics (no movement from premises to conclusion), perception (no notational representation), and linguistics (no terms for an argument)? Does not even the fundamental axiom of non-contradiction tell us that nothing can both be and not-be in the same *sense* at the same *time*? The law therefore includes essential reference to terms whose sense has other-than-logical meaning, as well as to time. The conclusion of the thought experiment is therefore the same for the logical as it is for every other aspectual kind of properties-and-laws: it cannot be isolated from the other kinds without becoming "meaningless and void". So Dooyeweerd's claim that when we, as thinking subjects, abstract a *Gegenstand* we simultaneously succeed in separating the logical aspect of our thought from the full concrete act of thinking, is simply false. We can neither think of the logical aspect in isolation nor employ it in disconnect from all non-logical aspects howsoever hard we try.

Neither, of course, can we think of the logical aspect as true only of our thought. Were not concrete objects of experience subject to logical laws and thus in possession of logical properties, they could not be distinguished and conceptualized. Being *distinguishable* is a passive logical property that requires a thing be subject to the axioms of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle. The passive possession of logical properties is thus analogous to the way things have passive sensory properties. The color red may not be actualized without being actively perceived, but if an object had no passive potentiality to appear red it could not be actively perceived to be red. Just so, the logical distinctness of a concrete thing or of any of its properties can only

become actually manifest in relation to consciousness that is actively logical. But unless the thing and its properties had the logical property of being-able-to-be-distinguished, we could not distinguish them. To deny this would be to assert that we in fact distinguish what is not distinguishable, which is self-contradictory.

### The Transcendental Critique as to the Gegenstand Relation

We have already noted that the relation between the abstractively isolated logical aspect of thought and its non-logical abstractum is the one Dooyeweerd renamed the “Gegenstand relation.” We also noticed that he resorted to this German term so as to guard against confusing the pre-theoretical relation between the knower and known that does not employ abstraction, with this one that does involve abstraction. So for him, “subject-object” always refers to the relation of a concrete act of experience (having all the aspects) to some concrete object which also has some properties of every aspect, whether actively or passively. Any Gegenstand relation between knower and known is therefore one in which abstraction is employed, and holds between the logical aspect of the knower and some isolated non-logical aspect. It is these two abstractions that need to be somehow re-united in thought if concepts are to be possible.

By now it should not be necessary to dwell at length on what is wrong with this description of the Gegenstand relation. If the conclusion of our thought experiment is correct, no aspect can be isolated from all others regardless of whether it’s an aspect of ourselves or of a concrete object. Once again, Dooyeweerd has confused isolating properties, laws, and entire kinds of them *from concrete objects or persons* with isolating them *from one another*. Since our thought experiment shows the latter to be a conceptual impossibility, we are forced to say that Dooyeweerd’s formulation of the second basic problem for theory making is not correct. It can neither be phrased as the need to synthetically reunite the logical aspect of the subject side of thought with its object-side abstractum, nor as the need to reunite mutually isolated aspects on the object side. Rather, the fundamental problem for theory making needs to be reformulated this way: *What is the nature of the inter-aspectual connectedness which is so strong that we cannot isolate any aspect even by abstract thinking?*

It is this question, not the one about “synthesis”, that is truly transcendental in the sense that no theory of reality can avoid it.<sup>25</sup> A theory of reality that answers it by selecting one or another aspect of the cosmos as qualifying the nature of that connection is thereby committed to a pagan divinity belief. We already saw, for example, that materialism solves the connectedness problem either by maintaining that all other aspects are caused by realities that are exclusively physical, or it attempts to dis-solve the problem by arguing that everything whatever is exclusively physical. Both claims regard the self-existent reality (or realities) on which all else depends as exclusively physical. Phenomenalism, by contrast, accounts for the connectedness by claiming that everything is exclusively sensory or emotive. Against these, and all other claims endorsing aspects of the cosmos as the nature of the divine, our thought experiment shows that we cannot so much as frame the idea of anything as exclusively X where X is any aspect of the cosmos. Thus the many versions of pagan deifications of the cosmos collapse as justifiable hypotheses since no one can justify a belief with no content. In this way the thought experiment restores that part of Dooyeweerd’s critique that turned out not to be transcendental on his formulation. For it shows why any abstracted aspect that is regarded as the nature of Absolute reality, literally cannot be thought of at all and thus cannot be thought of as having that status. We can form no idea of independently existing realities that are exclusively numerical, spatial, kinetic, physical, biotic, sensory, logical, etc. The thought experiment has thus exposed why all such claims are *unjustifiable* divinity beliefs, and so are pretheoretical religious commitments rather than theoretical hypotheses, for no one can justify a claim he can’t frame any idea of.

Earlier I made the point that ontological dualisms are worse off in relation to the thought experiment since they make the same unjustifiable claim for two aspects instead of only one. So it is worth noting that they also have the further difficulty that they can’t explain the connection between their two ultimate principles. Take, for example, the classical dualism of form and matter found in ancient Greek thought. In those theories “form” referred to the causes of the orderliness that was observed in the world. But what *kind* of order was meant? We observe that concrete things conform to many kinds of order such as quantitative, spatial, kinematic, physical, logical, etc. If a particular kind is chosen, then the thought experiment shows why that kind cannot be conceived as independent of the other kinds. If the reply is made that it’s all the kinds taken together, then there is still no reason to think all the dependent kinds form an independent reality.

The same thing recurs on the matter side of the duality. “Matter” refers to the stuff, the whatever-it-is, that gets ordered. But what *kind* of thing is that? Again, if any one aspect is picked we find it cannot be conceived to have independent existence. If the reply is made that what is meant is pure potentiality, the same difficulty recurs: what *kind* of potentiality? If its kind is specified then, once again, whatever kind it’s said to be is supposed to have independent reality when in fact it cannot be thought of as independent. If it can’t be specified at all, the idea is as meaningless as all the other proposals of anything as “purely” X. It was for these reasons Dooyeweerd opposed every claim of ontological reduction. His point was that any theory of reality that locates the guarantor of connectedness within the cosmos has thereby committed itself to an immanent replacement for the transcendent Creator.

### The Revised Transcendental Critique and Scholasticism

The revision of the critique that I’m proposing here also serves to show why attempting to baptize a reductive ontology into theistic acceptability won’t work. This was one of Dooyeweerd’s emphases despite the many Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers who undertook some version of it, and his rejection of it comprised his chief difference from them.<sup>26</sup> The majority of theistic thinkers have thought they could neutralize the pagan character of any theory that proposes something within the cosmos as that which all else in the cosmos depends on. Their ploy was to say that no matter what is selected for that role could be baptized (or circumcised) into theistic acceptability if we simply add the claim that whatever it is which all else in the cosmos reduces to, in turn depends on God. So it wouldn’t matter whether a theory took the rest of the cosmos to depend on purely physical matter, on the interaction of form and matter, on mathematical laws and physical matter, or on logical categories and sense perception, etc. Any candidate for the role of explainer-of-the-rest-of-the-cosmos can be made theistically acceptable by adding the phrase, “and this in turn depends on God”.<sup>27</sup>

But in the light of our thought experiment, this ploy becomes as implausible as any purely pagan stance. For if we cannot so much as frame the idea of any aspect as independent of all the rest, then none is a plausible candidate for the nature of what all else in the cosmos depends on. No one (or two) can plausibly be the reason the others exist if we cannot so much as think of it independently of them. Therefore, regarded as



*theories* all such proposals turn out to be unjustifiable because inconceivable; regarded as *religious* beliefs all are hopelessly contrary to theism. Besides: there is no longer any reason left for theists to wish to maintain the reductionist strategy for theories since the thought experiment has shown the entire strategy has zero explanatory power. Its illusion of explanatory power depends upon the sleight-of-hand trick of making claims on behalf of realities that are allegedly purely X in nature, and then shifting the meaning of X to include other aspects in the explanations that follow. The alleged explanatory power of reductionist theories is thus based on sheer equivocation.

### The Revised Critique and the Religious Control of All of Life

I began this article by reviewing the reasons Dooyeweerd had for thinking that a critique of theory making which exposes its religious control is possible and important. There are, I said, scriptural grounds for that idea deriving from the biblical teaching that humans are essentially religious. In note 7, I cited Kuyper as having endorsed that same idea and in note 8 cited a few of the scripture texts that support it.

What is taught by the scripture texts I cited go further than Dooyeweerd's application of them to theories, however. Those texts (and a number of others) say that knowing God somehow favorably impacts "every sort of knowledge" (I Cor. 1:5) and "all truth" (Eph. 5:8, 9). Dooyeweerd clearly held this wider view as well, but never argued for it in a way parallel to his attempt to demonstrate it for theories. But the version of the critique that I'm proposing here is also able to show how the religious control it has demonstrated for theories can apply to *every concept whatever*. It can therefore supply an interpretation for these texts that are so vexing because they claim that knowing God impacts all knowledge and truth. But before proceeding to explain this interpretation, I'd like to make clear a few of its background assumptions about concept formation.

In pre-theoretical concept formation we select and explicitly combine in thought some of the properties of the concrete thing we want to conceptualize.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, we tacitly recognize that every property a thing has belongs in the concept of it even though it's impossible for us to be conscious of, and specifically itemize, each and every one of them. (This is not only true *in fact* because many properties of any concrete thing are circumstantially inaccessible to us at any given time,

but also *in principle* because every concrete thing has an infinite number of properties.) The choice of which properties we consciously and explicitly include in a concept is driven by our needs relative to that thing, such as re-identifying it and employing it for our purposes. So, for example, I include in my concept of my suitcase at least its size (so I'll know what will fit into it), its color and shape (so I can identify it as it comes down the conveyor belt at the airport), and the combination of its lock. I set aside discovering its exact chemical composition even though I know it surely has some such composition. Besides, although we're aware of not being able to specify all the properties in the concept of a concrete thing, we're usually far more concerned not to include in our concept any property the thing doesn't have. We want our concepts to be true to (correspond to) things as we experience them. The concept of a *type* of things, by contrast, contains *en toto* many fewer properties than the concept of any concrete member of the type. For the concept of a type is restricted to only those properties that all members of the type share in common. Thus the linguistic statement of the content of a type-concept is the definition of that type. These are important differences. But what's more important is what both types of concepts have in common: with respect to both, we are always attempting to conform them to what we experience.

But theoretical concepts are not so. They *are* our inventions. Of course, we don't create their building blocks out of nothing. But we do freely combine what we distinguish or abstract from experience into new thought-unities which become concepts of theoretical constructs. So the concept of a hypothetical thing, event, state of affairs, law, pattern, force, etc., contains precisely the properties we put into it and they stand in precisely the relations we ascribe to them. (Whether that combination then corresponds to anything in reality is what the business of theory evaluation struggles to find out.) For this reason, precisely how those properties relate within the concepts of postulated entities is crucial to understanding the *kind* of entity being postulated. We can't just propose "There are atoms", for example. We have to say what kind of thing an atom is so as to know what it (supposedly) can and can't do, in order to judge how well it explains what it's postulated to explain.<sup>29</sup> And to know the kind of thing an atom is, we must know both the properties included in its concept and the sort of relation that makes their combination possible. This is the point which Dooyeweerd's original critique and my revision have both seized upon: the importance of the connectedness between properties and laws of different aspectual kinds. For any theory will have to view the

connectedness of the properties in the concepts of its postulates as explained by one of the following claims: 1) all reality is comprised of only one kind of entities which thus stand in only relations of that same kind to one another; 2) there is some one or two kind(s) of entities that are the metaphysical cause of all entities of other kinds, and the general relation between them is the metaphysical cause of all else; 3) there are many kinds of properties and relations and none is the metaphysical cause of any other.<sup>30</sup> Both Dooyeweerd and I hold that 3) is the position required by Theism, and that 1) and 2) are instances of paganism that are not able to be redeemed by the scholastic ploy.

But on Dooyeweerd's version of the critique, there was no obvious way to show just how religious control was true of pre-theoretical as well as of theoretical concepts. As I said, he clearly held this to be the case, but had no argument to show exactly *how*. His critique of theory making couldn't serve that purpose because on his account of how we form pre-theoretical concepts, we do not first break up the inter-aspectual connectedness and thus are not forced to take a position as to how that connectedness can be re-established as he claimed theoretical concepts do. Hence no choice of "starting point for synthesis" needs to be made for pretheoretical concepts, where the choices would have to be 1), 2), or 3) above. On my view, however, the inter-aspectual connectedness is never broken whether we are dealing with theories or not. My focus is on identifying the *nature* of the connectedness between properties of different kinds which is so strong it cannot ever be broken. And *that* issue is as apropos of pre-theoretical concepts as it is of theories! To show how this version of critique can apply to a pre-theoretical concept, I'm going to use the same example that I did in *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (revised edition, 2005, p.79, ff) – the concept of a concrete object, a saltshaker.

If I am seated at dinner with a materialist and ask him to pass me the salt, he understands what I've asked and passes the salt. Neither of us sees a saltshaker on the table because of what we believe to be divine; we see the saltshaker because our perception is in proper working order, the light is normal, and there's a saltshaker on the table. Since we share a common language we both use the term "saltshaker" for the concrete object we see, and the term has the same meaning for us both because we have the same concept of the type of thing a saltshaker is. More than that, we have closely similar concepts of *this* saltshaker because we have noticed and combined many of the same properties it displays in our respective concepts of it. The overlap in the

characteristics we've included in our respective concepts is our basis for believing that we're speaking of the same concrete thing: it's at that particular location on the table, it's so tall, it appears to contain salt, it has a cap with holes in it, and so on. And there are many other characteristics which we tacitly include in our concepts even though we may not explicitly articulate them: weight, solidity, transparency, shape, color, etc. In all this, so far as obtaining the salt is concerned, nothing about divinity need arise. We may even agree further that the saltshaker is exceptionally beautiful and outrageously overpriced. But if we pursue those last judgments and discuss them further, it would not be long before my companion would tell me either that the saltshaker doesn't really have the properties of beauty or of being overpriced since there are really no such properties, or that if it does have them they are the product of its purely physical properties.

The contrast between this pre-theoretical concept and that of a theoretical entity, then, is that while specifying the inter-relations of different kinds of properties is necessary even to a partial understanding of a postulated entity, there is a superficial (but important) level at which a pre-theoretically experienced concrete object can be understood without that specification. All the same, if the concept of any concrete object is probed more deeply, one or another of the three positions enumerated earlier will manifest itself. That is, once we ask how the properties of different kinds are conceived to connect in that object, we are faced with the three options listed above. On option 1) the need to account for the relation between a multiplicity of kinds of properties will be dismissed as appearance not reality, and a particular aspect will be said to qualify the self-existent (divine) realities and their relations. On option 2) the property-connectedness will be explained by the claim that some self-existent realities whose nature is purely of one (or two) aspect(s) produce all the other kinds. On option 3) every aspect will be regarded as equally real, and the connectedness between them, as well as among the dependent concrete realities exhibiting them, will be viewed as brought about by a transcendent Absolute cause (in the metaphysical sense of "cause").<sup>31</sup> No matter which of the views is assumed, however, and no matter how unconsciously they may be held, the upshot is that *there is a divinity belief implicit in every pre-theoretical concept*. For in every case the properties included in any concept of a concrete thing will be viewed as organized by the kind of relation that makes their combination possible. And that relation will be of the kind that is taken as self-existent.

Let me repeat that all this remains below the threshold of consciousness for most people most of the time. In ordinary discourse it doesn't usually arise at all, and many people wouldn't have the slightest idea of what they regard as connecting the properties included in their concepts even if the question were raised to them (most of my students would be likely to say, "Let's have a drink and forget it.") *But without a commitment to a transcendent metaphysical cause, there is by default a commitment to something within the cosmos as metaphysical cause of all else whether or not that cause is consciously specified.* Thus the existence of a level at which the issue doesn't arise, and the fact that many people are unaware of their position on the issue, are both irrelevant to my (and Dooyeweerd's) contention. It is still the case that one or another of the three positions sketched above is implicit in every concept, so that some divinity belief or other is implicit as well.

In this way, the revised version of Dooyeweerd's critique exposes where and how divinity beliefs impose their influence upon all concepts, pre-theoretical as well as theoretical. It thus provides an explication of the biblical claim that knowing God (somehow) favorably impacts every sort of knowledge and all truth. For it shows a clear sense in which any concept, no matter how much else it may get right, is at least partly and importantly wrong if it is not controlled by belief in God. (*N.C.* 1. 116; 2, 572)<sup>32</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that scripture *never* teaches anything that can be appropriated by a theory. It teaches, for example, that there are many different authorities in human social life none of which derive from any other because all derive from God, and it teaches that humans are morally responsible for what they do. These are surely examples of biblical teachings that no *Christian* theory should ignore. Dooyeweerd was concerned, however, that such examples not be mistaken for the most general way that scriptural teaching impacts theories. For other summaries of Dooyeweerd's distinctive approach see *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, trans. David Freeman & William Young (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1953), 4 vols. 1, 506 - 508; 2, 30-36; henceforward referred to as *N.C.*

<sup>2</sup>

*N.C.* 1, 45-49, 55-60; 2, 501-508.

<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Dooyeweerd's ontology is strikingly parallel to Aristotle's in that they both raise many of the same questions and both regard identifying the divine as the linchpin of their theories. Dooyeweerd's surpasses Aristotle's not by being more detailed but because his doesn't run into the dead ends entailed by holding to a duality of ultimate divinities (form and matter) abstracted from the cosmos. It should be noted here that Dooyeweerd himself used the term "cosmology" for his theory rather than "ontology" so as to avoid any suggestion that his theory of reality included God. But since "cosmology" has a different sense in present day English, and "ontology" is the more usual term for theory of reality, I will stick with "ontology" with the stipulation that it means here a theory of only *created* reality.

<sup>4</sup>

A new edition, identical in text and pagination, was issued by Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY, in 1997.

<sup>5</sup>

During the summers of 1967 and 1971 I had over 20 private conferences with Dooyeweerd of two to three hours each at his home.

<sup>6</sup>

At an early stage of his critique Dooyeweerd acknowledges that it shows only that theory making is dependent on some supra-theoretical presuppositions about human self-knowledge, without asserting this to involve religious belief. (*N.C.* 1, 55, 56) At a later stage, however, after having defined the divine as that which has absolute reality, he asserts of the presupposition as to the nature of the human self that "we can establish the fact that... [it] must be of religious origin." (*N.C.* 1, 59) He also adds that he does not believe it is possible to prove that this definition of religious belief is true. The absence of strict proof doesn't mean there are no good reasons for that definition, however. Indeed, the evidence for it is overwhelming. See chapter 2 of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, revised edition, 2005); henceforth referred to as *Myth*. The original edition was in 1991.

<sup>7</sup>

This view had also been held by A. Kuyper in his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1898): "Especially the leading thought which we have formed in that realm of life which holds our chiefest interest exercises a mighty domain upon the whole content of our consciousness, viz., our religious views...if, then, we make a mistake [about religion]... how can it fail to communicate itself to our entire scientific study?" (pp. 109-110) "It follows at the same time that the knowledge of the cosmos as a whole... philosophy... is equally bound to founder upon...sin [in the sense of false religious belief]." (p. 113).

<sup>8</sup>

Comp., e.g., Ps. 111:10, Prov. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33; and Jer. 8:9 with Luke 11:52, I Cor. 1:5, II Cor. 4:3-6 and

Eph. 5: 8, 9. These texts say that knowing God impacts not just theories but "every sort of knowledge" and "all truth". There are yet other loci that convey the same point, but these are sufficient to show that the teaching has biblical warrant.

<sup>9</sup>

See, e.g., *N.C.*, 1, 44; 2, 431- 434.

<sup>10</sup>

While this point is secure with respect to theories of science and philosophy, there surely are hypotheses that are not abstract and abstract thought that is not theoretical so that – strictly speaking – it was misleading for Dooyeweerd to use "abstract" and "theoretical" as synonymous as he does throughout the *N.C.* We can think abstractly without making any hypothesis, as when we do arithmetic. And we can invent hypotheses without abstracting as we do when postulating that the boss is grumpy today because of the dent in his new car, or as when a detective forms a theory about the identity of a criminal.

<sup>11</sup> *N.C.* 1, 57. It should be emphasized that Dooyeweerd was careful to distinguish any concrete act of divinity belief from the disposition of the heart which was its basis. The heart's disposition he called its "ground-motive" (*N.C.* 2, 304). It is the ground-motive of the heart that both gives rise to specific acts of belief and drives ontologies.

<sup>12</sup> Dooyeweerd never defined the term "aspect" in the *N.C.* but agreed with the definition "a basic kind of properties and laws" when I proposed it to him in conversation. And although he more often speaks of aspectual "functions" than "properties", it is clear these are interchangeable along with yet other terms such as "features," "qualities", and "characteristics." Consider, for example, the following five comments: "We know of the logical features that distinguish it from other things. We are also conscious of its cultural properties, its name, its value in social life, its economic and aesthetic qualities, and so on." [*Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy*, (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2004), vol. 2, p. 83]. "The objective logical features and the objective beauty of the rose, its objective cultural properties, its economic scarcity and worth, its possibility of becoming the object of property rights – all these things are regarded in

pretheoretical experience as belonging to the full reality of the rose, even though the aspects that contain these objective qualities require the application of normative standards." (*Ibid*, 96) "The properties of physical space are determined by matter as moving mass." [*Introduction to the Encyclopedia of the Science of Law*, (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2002), vol. 1, 107] "To think of their existence apart from humankind, one would need to eliminate all the logical, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and other properties that relate them to humankind." [*Roots of Western Culture* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2003), 30]. "This moment corresponds to the sensory space of awareness in which one observes colors, sounds, hardness or softness, and other properties which can be perceived by the senses." (*Ibid*, 46).

I will add here that in my opinion his insistence that it is entire aspects that we first abstract from individual concrete things, is not plausible. In his article "De transcendentale critiek van het wijsgeerig denken en de grondslagen van de wijsgeerige denkgemeenschap van het avondland. trans. Togtman, ed. D. Strauss, (*Philosophia Reformata* 6 (1941), pp. 1-20) he says: "In the theoretical ... attitude of thought logical analysis is directed *first of all* upon the...aspects themselves, which are pried asunder into... discontinuity...and abstracted from their given, continuous, systatic coherence." (pp. 5,6) I find a more accurate description of the order in which we abstract to be that, like young children learning colors, we first abstract *tropes* – individual properties. We then distinguish the commonality among many tropes to form a universal, and finally distinguish the even broader commonality exhibited by many universals and levels of them to arrive at the idea an entire aspect (what Dooyeweerd called an aspect's "meaning kernel"). The preliminary step of distinguishing and abstracting tropes is often missed because the step to universals is rapid and the subsequent *terms* for properties are universal. See the essays by Williams and Campbell in *Properties*, ed. D.H. Mellor & Alex Oliver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Dooyeweerd used not only "modality," "aspect", and "modal aspect" to refer to the basic kinds of properties and laws of the cosmos, but also called them "law-spheres", and "facets."

<sup>14</sup> Comp. the remarks of A. N. Whitehead: "What is the status of the... order of nature? There is the summary answer, which refers nature to some greater reality standing behind it... [But] any...jumping from... [the] order of nature to...an ultimate reality...constitutes the great refusal of reason to assert its rights. We have to search whether nature does not in its very being show itself as self-explanatory." (*Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), 97. Dooyeweerd's way of describing this position is that theories constructed on this basis regard the divine (Absolute) as immanent to the cosmos: "...immanence philosophy is forced to construct various *absolutizations* of...aspects." (*N.C.* 1, 103).

Of course, it is also possible to claim that it is the cosmos as a whole that is self-existent, rather than an aspect of it. But unless the aspectual *nature* of the cosmos as a whole is specified, we are left in the dark both as to the kind of divinity it comprises and as to the nature of the connectedness among all the kinds of properties and laws found within it. This vague position is therefore religiously, philosophically, and scientifically unsatisfying.

<sup>15</sup> See the comments of Werner Jaeger on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII, 3, 1070a and on his *Protrepticus* in *Aristotle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; English edition 1960), 49-52. For the same mistake in

Descartes, see the section *from Meditations on First Philosophy* in *Descartes' Philosophical Writings*, trans. N.K. Smith (New York: The Modern Library, 1958), 237.

<sup>16</sup>

See, e.g., *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul), 1963.

<sup>17</sup>

Incredibly, this point has occasionally been denied as G. Friesen has done in his article, "Dooyeweerd, Spaan, and the Philosophy of Totality" [*Philosophia Reformata*, vol. 70 (2005), no. 1] Friesen says: "Dooyeweerd ...continued to reject an approach that begins with individual things and then tries to abstract from them. The aspects cannot be deduced from individuality structures but are prior to them." (p.8)

Because of its egregious confusion of abstraction with deduction, this statement misunderstands the remarks of Dooyeweerd it is supposedly derived from, and is flatly inconsistent with the *N.C.* and Dooyeweerd's other writings. First, the remarks of Dooyeweerd referenced to support it actually say that aspectual *laws* ("structure") are not arrived at by continued abstraction in contrast to the way we can arrive at aspectual properties by continued abstraction. It is this point which was preceded by the comment that we can't deduce laws from our experience of individual things any more than we can deduce individual things from laws. ["De Kentheoretische Gegenstandsrelatie en de Logische Subject-Objectrelatie," *Philosophia Reformata*, 40 (1975), 90 (unpublished translation by G. Friesen)]. But the denial of any such *deduction* has nothing to do with whether entire aspects are *abstracted* from concrete things and events as well as distinguished from other aspects as distinct kinds. We have already seen that Dooyeweerd's formulation of the most basic problem of philosophy is phrased in just the way Friesen denies: "The first transcendental basic problem... is...What do we abstract... from the structures of empirical reality as those structures are given in naïve experience?" (*N.C.* 1, 41) Dooyeweerd's answer on the pages that follow is "aspects." Elsewhere he makes the same point as clearly as possible. He offers as an example of a concrete event the act of buying cigars, and says: "Each aspect of the concrete transaction which took place in the cigar shop... is abstracted from concrete temporal reality..." [*Encyclopedia of the Science of Law* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2002), 15]. And again, he says: "Wherever, in some fashion or other, we abstract in our thinking a Gegenstand out of concrete reality, we are not dealing with naïve but with the theoretical attitude of thought." (*Ibid.* 28) He repeats this same point in *Reformation and Scholasticism in Philosophy* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2004), vol.2, p. 251: "When one abstracts quantity, spatial extension, and the other modal characteristics ...from the full reality of the tree there is nothing left of it. It is entirely enclosed within the temporal horizon of reality which only tolerates individual totalities with the diversity



of aspects.” and “...a modal function [is] abstracted from the typical structures of individuality.” (N.C.1, 554). See also N.C. 1: 552-553; 2: 84-85, 371, 418, 431-433, 460, 468- 469, 470-471, 556, 561; 3: 26, 29, 64-65, 145, 264. Nor can it be replied that aspects are abstracted from time rather than individual things: “Time, in its continuity, may not be cut off from reality as a floating abstraction... Reality in its typical thing-structure, is present in time’s continuous coherence.” (N.C. 3, 64)

Moreover, it is misleading to describe Dooyeweerd’s full position as holding that the modal aspects are prior to individuality structures, without acknowledging that in some respects he sees a reverse priority and that neither is his final position. Dooyeweerd does at times speak of a sense in which aspects can be prior to individuals (Ibid, 1975, p. 90), but the sense of priority they may have appears to be relative to the problem at hand. That is why when their relation is approached from another angle, he also says: “The transcendental idea of the individual whole precedes the theoretical analysis of its modal functions. It is its presupposition, its cosmological a priori.” (N.C. 3, 65) Neither remark reflects his full position, which is that neither laws nor the things subject to them are temporally or causally prior to the other since - ontically speaking – they are correlative. His own summary of his position is that “There is no law without subject and vice versa” (N.C. 1, 508). See also N.C. 2, 418 where he insists that the two exist “in strict correlation.”

18

*In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Lewiston: Mellen Press, 1999).

19

N.C.1, 1. It cannot be replied that for Dooyeweerd the “indissoluble coherence” of aspects is true only of pre-theoretical experience while abstract thought actually succeeds in isolating them. For in addition to the denials of that suggestion already quoted, he also says that any theory attempting to view a particular aspect as absolute, has “...thereby disassociated [it] from its...coherence, and consequently [it] becomes *meaningless* and *void*.” (N.C. 1, 63) Here his inconsistency is patent within the same sentence! For if isolating an aspect renders it meaningless and void, and an aspect is a mode of meaning, then *it* never gets isolated. Elsewhere he repeats again that every abstract Gegenstand including the logical aspect “is incapable of seclusion.” (N.C. 2, 487)

Furthermore, a successful isolation of any one aspect from the others is also at odds with his position that the basic abstract concepts in every aspect are *analogical*. This is his term for the way no basic concept in any aspect can be “pure” because all are connected by unbreakable tendrils of meaning to other aspects. See “The Analogical Concepts,” trans. R. Knudsen from “De analogische grondbegrippen der vakwetenschappen en hun betrekking tot de structuur van den menselijke ervaringshorizon.” *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, afd. Letterkunde*, New Series, vol. 17, no. 6 (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1954).

20

Dooyeweerd makes the same point. See N.C. 2, 471.

21

N.C. 2, 582; 3, 66.

22

Indeed, he once said to me in conversation that “When we select a book from a shelf we have already abstracted it.”

23

This version of a critique of theory making is the same as the one I present in ch. 10 of *Myth*, where it is then followed by an introductory account of Dooyeweerd’s ontology in the succeeding chapters. I don’t attribute my version of the critique to him, of course, though I acknowledge that my idea for the thought experiment argument was inspired by some of his own remarks. See N.C. 2, 539.

24

Ibid. (1975).

25

I believe it was Wilfred Sellers who said: “Philosophy asks how every thing, in the most general sense of ‘thing’, hangs together, in the most general sense of ‘hangs together.’”

26

For the religious and theological background to this difference see my article “The Uniqueness of Dooyeweerd’s Program for Philosophy and Science: Whence the Difference?” in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Griffioen & Balk (Kok-Kampen, 1995), 113-125.

27

The thinkers who made use of this device never seem to have been bothered by the assertion in the NT to the effect that it is only Christ in his divine nature on whom everything depends and by whom “all things are held together” (Col. 1:17). This point was noticed by St Gregory Palamas, however, when he said: “Christians cannot tolerate any intermediate substance between Creator and creatures, nor any mediating hypostasis.” (John Meyendorf, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: Faith Press, 1964), 130. Orthodox theology has been persistent on this point. See also J. Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 53, 252, 256-259.

28

Dooyeweerd, too, held - against the rationalist tradition - that we form concepts of concrete individuals. See N.C. 2, 470.

29

There have been many atomic theories since Leucippus cooked up the first one around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone there are at least three distinct versions of it, each contrary to the others. See *Myth*, chapter 8.

30

The term “metaphysical” was avoided by Dooyeweerd because it had so many connotations that were at odds with his own views. But here I mean by “metaphysical cause” that which is the reason why there are such things as X at all and not merely that which is the occasion for X. This is not usually what is sought in science. If we heat a copper wire, e.g., it glows green. In that case the heat is said to be the “cause of” (occasion for) the green glow, and that is the sort of cause science is interested in. But the heat would not be regarded as the metaphysical cause of the glow unless it were also taken to be the reason there are such things as green glows in the cosmos.

31

There is also the possibility that the multiplicity of kinds of properties be considered equally *unreal* because they are merely appearance (Maya) generated by a transcendent metaphysical cause. This position reflects the pantheistic sense of “transcendence” found in Hinduism and Buddhism.

32

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Abstract  
of  
The Transcendental Critique Revisited and Revised

Dooyeweerd's account of abstraction is examined and found to be faulty. He holds that abstract thinking isolates aspects which must then be synthesized, whereas I argue that we cannot isolate any aspect from the others however so hard we try. But our very inability to isolate aspects is then turned into an alternative version of a transcendental critique of theory making. Instead of asking for a basis for synthesizing aspects we have isolated, the new version asks: what is the nature of the aspectual connectedness which is so strong that it cannot be interrupted even by abstraction? I argue that it is impossible for anyone to understand the meaning of a concept without taking a position on this issue, whether that is done implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, every answer to this question presupposes a divinity belief. Hence, this recasting of the critique yields a demonstration of the religious regulation of all concepts and every theory. In this way the goal of Dooyeweerd's critique is achieved, even if not in the way he envisioned.