

# Philosophy Attuned to Reality

## Crocodiles and philosophy

Several years ago I went on a sumptuous cruise down the river Nile. My mother had won fifty thousand pounds on the premium bonds and so she decided to treat me to the holiday of a lifetime. On the boat I met a really friendly and eccentric plumber from Burnley whose name was Mr Dobson. He was very attached to his brown fedora and he spoke very amusingly about his impressive hat collection. We got on extremely well but one evening he vanished and so I decided to go and look for him. I got off the boat and I wandered down to the banks of the Nile.

Suddenly I saw his distinctive hat bobbing on the water about twenty yards out. It was definitely Mr Dobson's hat. No doubt at all. I waded out into the water and just as I was picking the fedora up, this huge twenty-foot crocodile took me in its jaws of death. For many of you unfamiliar with this experience, the Nile croc takes you on a death roll for several minutes just before it kills you and deposits you in its underwater pantry.

Now fortunately I had been a keen admirer of Tarzan in my youth. I knew I had a trusty Swiss army knife in my pocket and I managed to extract the blade from my trousers. Things were looking up. Unfortunately the first attachment I managed to prise open was the corkscrew. Desperately I tried again and this time I won the jackpot – the big blade. I was just about to thrust the knife into the top corner of the crocodile's mouth when suddenly the huge reptile tossed me like an unwanted pork pie onto the nearby riverbank. I was stunned but completely unharmed apart from a few bruises. I strolled back to the boat and I was most gratified to find a hatless Mr Dobson sipping a glass of chilled white wine on the main deck. He was delighted to discover that I had retrieved his fedora for him and even more pleased to hear about my narrow escape from death.

It's fascinating the responses you get when you tell a tall story. As a teacher I have used this fanciful yarn on numerous occasions and many listeners have swallowed the tale hook, line and sinker. One sixteen-year-old boy asked me if I had the bruises to corroborate the incident and a female colleague was deeply impressed by my boy-scout skills. Others sniffed out the cheeky ruse within seconds.

Everyone loves a good story. Children will sit for hours as long as the story is 'right'. Mischievous teenagers will terminate their playful banter and actually listen. Cynical, world-weary secular citizens will perk up and proffer a smile. A good story is always a winner. From a Christian perspective the world, although fallen, is still a bobbydazzler. It's full of nooks and crannies. It's full of twists and turns, thrills and spills. And stories engage us with this opulence. That's why we like them so much.

Is it possible to translate this complex richness of reality into a philosophical theory? Dutch Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) has

developed a sophisticated and highly original philosophy that seeks to honour this luscious and ripe fruit that we call the world. And the simplest way to understand this philosophy is to consider the humble crocodile. What exactly is it? Let's briefly outline some of the answers that Dooyeweerd would rebuff.

Ancient Egyptians worshipped crocodiles in the form of the fertility god – Sobek. They would adorn lucky, pampered crocs with jewels and necklaces and bow down and worship these menacing reptiles. In many ways to become a sacred croc was like winning the lottery for your ordinary, wild snapper. A life of luxury and indolence would unfold. There are still locations in modern Africa where crocodiles continue to be worshipped. In the country of Burkina Faso, in the village of Sabou, live chickens are fed to sacred crocodiles. According to the local people, the crocodiles have never been known to harm the villagers and that is why they continue with their daily sacrifices. This pagan understanding of the snapper is emphatically rejected by Dooyeweerd.

More sophisticated pagans have contended that these crafty carnivores are really prisons for wicked souls. We have already noted this theme in Plato and Plotinus. The basic thrust of this platonic perspective urges us to restrain our bodily cravings and by living the superior life of reason we shall avoid the miseries of reincarnation. Rebirth in an alligator or a caiman is the inevitable outworking of a bad karma. Immoral people will be clothed in crocodilian flesh. For this is their fate. It should be obvious to the discerning reader that Dooyeweerd would firmly rebuff this advanced pagan option.

Various secular answers to the crocodile puzzle suggest themselves. For Descartes and Galileo the crocodile is merely a machine. It is a purely physical thing; a bit player in a Meccano set. For David Hume the snapper is a bundle of perceptions. It can be reduced to the sensory aspect. Both these Enlightenment understandings of the croc are spurned by Dooyeweerd. Committed, hardened consumerists might categorise the croc as a future handbag. Again this commodification of the fierce reptile is repugnant to the Dutch master. And in more mystical mode we could alert the reader to the Buddhist contention that the croc is merely an illusion. At the end of the day the snapper is part and parcel of a hidden, mystical Oneness.

The Dutchman is convinced that all these pagan, secular and pantheist perspectives are fundamentally mistaken. They miss the point entirely. Dooyeweerd takes his cue from the book of Genesis that informs those who lack knowledge that the crocodile is – surprise, surprise – a large and menacing reptile that we do well to avoid when we are swimming in African rivers. Crucial to the biblical mindset is the simple truth that God has created a fantastic variety of creatures after their own kinds (Genesis 1). Snappers have been designed to be snappers. They are not some hidden X lurking behind the crocodile façade.

Herman insists that we must not ignore our everyday, ordinary experience of the world. In the light of God's Word we attune ourselves to the simple fact that frogs were created to be frogs. Fish were created to be fish. And walruses were created to be walruses. In this sense Dooyeweerd's philosophy is a million miles away from sophisticated Kantian and Buddhist scholars who

dismiss our everyday experience of the world as illusory. The ordinary person is not deceived when distinguishing between turnips and parsnips when buying ingredients for the evening meal. The human ability to distinguish between different kinds of root vegetable is grounded in the simple fact that God has created a rich and complex cosmos bursting with colour, flair and fecundity. Congratulations are in order.

Dooyeweerd stresses that the existence of this rich and diverse creation is a response to the law of God. Creation is, therefore, totally subject to and dependent upon God's creative law. According to the Scriptures, the law or word of God orders and structures the creation. In this sense Dooyeweerd is radically at odds with the Kantian claim that the human mind shapes and moulds the empirical world.

Too often people interpret this biblical idea of law in a narrow moral sense but this fails to do justice to biblical teaching. In its broadest sense God's word is responsible for the existence of space and time, mountains, valleys, cheetahs, lions, zebras, oak trees, tulips, diamonds, rubies and everything else. God's word structures and upholds the entire creation. God's word is also the norm for healthy creaturely life. By his law, God does not just say, "Let there be crocodiles and alligators." He also commands obedience to his laws of justice, love and stewardly care. God commands men and women to love their neighbours and to look after the animals, the trees and the land. Let's now investigate how this biblical mindset can be fleshed out in philosophical analysis.

Indulge me for a moment by imagining that we are hunters strolling through the jungle and we come across a large crocodile snoozing in the heat of the day. The snapper's snout is wide open and birds are impersonating dentists by removing insects and decaying meat from the dragon's teeth. As western secular hunters we are determined to transform the snapper into expensive handbags and so we raise our rifles and take aim at the vulnerable beast. Suddenly local tribesmen emerge from the bushes and beg us to restrain our commercial activities. They are worshippers of the crocodile and they inform us piously that the gods will bring great sorrow to their village if the crocodile is killed. Suddenly the croc wakes up, the birds scatter and the repulsive reptile makes a dash for the river. Mumbling apologies we return to our campsite.

Dooyeweerd argues that we must attend to the rich, multi-faceted nature of this event. According to Herman we can speak about fifteen aspects that help us to grasp the vignette in its totality. Miss any of them out and our analysis will be denuded and threadbare. For example we can weigh the beast; some crocs weigh as much as 2000 pounds! This suggests the idea of quantity. Mathematicians of all ages are keen students of this *numerical* aspect. Consider also the shape of the snapper's snout and we are immediately alerted to the *spatial* dimension. Admirers of the American alligator are often struck by its shorter, blunter proboscis. Further reflection will reveal a *kinematic* aspect. This dimension of reality is characterised by movement and crocodilians can shift from first to fourth gear with alarming alacrity. Crocodiles can shoot themselves out of the water at over forty miles an hour

and this often terrifies unsuspecting wildebeast who are naively slurping cooling water.

As we delve deeper into the complex layers of tangible reality we encounter the *physical* sphere of life in all its power and glory. Imagine a twenty footer hurling itself at your very good self and you would be struck forcibly by the physical prowess of the beast as it devours your arms and legs with unswerving tenacity. Physicists are attuned to this feature of reality when they study the properties of atoms, electrons and protons. Often they wear white coats and refer repeatedly to Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein.

Notice the reptile breathing, blinking and sweating and you will encounter the *biological* dimension of the brute. It's alive and in urgent need of daily nourishment. Biologists wax lyrical about this angle. Bang a sturdy nail through the croc's head and the creature will scream in pain. He may not be the brightest crayon in the box but he does have feelings. This feature should alert us to the *sensitive* aspect. Psychologists are experts in this field. Without embracing the full complexity of the topic we should note that research suggests that certain animals may have limited logical abilities. Snappers display considerable intelligence as they stalk their prey. This suggests the *technical* or *formative* aspect.

A philosopher who has developed Dooyeweerd's theory is Hendrik Hart and he offers some fascinating insights about animals and their technical abilities. He comments as follows:

Many dramatic stories are available from the animal world which highlight resourceful behaviour. I have myself received a reliable, firsthand eyewitness account of how a beaver came to the rescue of a small trout. The trout was wounded in the gills by an angler. Upon having been thrown back into the water the trout appeared in difficulty and could not get enough oxygen. A beaver then appeared and did what anglers know is helpful: it pushed the trout around in the water till the trout had regained enough strength to go it alone again. And a story reported in the *Weekend Post* in South Africa relates how an old goose acts as a blind guide for an old goat. The goose not only leads the goat around the farm by calling, but also wards off other animals by hissing. It goes without saying that such behaviour is known to be neither intuitive nor learned. It is, rather, what must be understood as creative behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

It goes without saying that crocodiles do not engage in high-level academic and scholarly activity. The hunters, on the other hand, are cognisant of the fact that there are 23 different types of crocodile species. This suggests the *logical* aspect in spades. Logicians and philosophers are keen students of this field of inquiry. We can also distinguish between the many different languages that are indispensable to human intercourse. Linguists tell us that the German for crocodile is *das Krokodil* and this alerts us to the *lingual* aspect. We can even give crocodiles names and make them our pets. This can considerably enrich dinner table conversation and so these humble carnivores can contribute to the *social* aspect. Sociologists scrutinise this dimension of life and might even discuss the crocodile's strange and friendly relationship with hungry birds.

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<sup>1</sup> Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1984) p.180.

There is a distinctive *economic* feature of the vignette. The hunters are hoping to make a fast buck when they spot the croc and pecuniary rewards can be garnered as the representatives of handbag companies receive the crocodile skin. Economists earn impressive salaries as they tackle this lucrative sphere. We can also distinguish an *aesthetic* dimension of the event as the hunters crack jokes about the crocodile and its remarkable resemblance to their mothers-in-laws. Further reflections about the incident reveal a *legal* dimension. Who exactly owns the crocodile? The hunters are dismayed at the presence of the local tribesmen but concede ownership of the snapper to the pagan worshippers. Lawyers can profit from these discussions. This feature also suggests the *ethical* aspect. Some people (environmentalists etc) really love the crocodilians and are very concerned about their survival. And finally we can distinguish the *faith* aspect. There are people who believe that the snapper is really a god who must be placated and appeased. Theologians are keen students of this topic.

It is important to stress that Herman’s theory is not about what exists but about how individual creatures exist. The crocodile, itself, is not a mode or an aspect. It is an individual creature which displays these many dimensions. We must distinguish between the crocodile and its many properties.

Now that we have an elementary grasp of these fifteen modes or aspects we can offer the following diagram by way of clarification:

Faith						
Ethical						
Legal						
Aesthetic						
Economic						
Social						
Linguistic						
Logical						
Technical						
Sensory						
Biological						
Physical						
Kinematic						
Spatial						
Numerical						
	rock		tree		animal	

Herman invites us to plumb the very depths of reality. His theory alerts us to the wonder and outrageous complexity of God’s handiwork. On the left side of the diagram we are reminded of the fifteen modes or aspects that creatures display. We must distinguish between God’s word for each mode and the actual way in which creatures function in these modes. For Dooyeweerd the created cosmos has two sides: a law-side and a subject-side. In the aesthetic mode we can speak of God’s word – “Let them crack jokes about crocodilians.” This is the law-side. On the other hand we can observe the hunters responding to this ‘word’ by cracking jokes. This is the subject-side. It is vital to recognise that the law-side is unaffected by sin, and is always universally valid.

Let's now focus upon the humble rock. Pick up a pebble and ponder its essence. Does it display all fifteen aspects? Yes and no. To grasp this unusual feature of the theory we must distinguish between active and passive aspects. The pebble functions actively in the numerical, spatial, kinematic and physical aspects. The pebble, however, does not function actively in the other aspects. Pebbles, unlike crocodiles, do not feel pain. They do not think and they do not worship. However we should notice that humans can think about pebbles and humans can worship pebbles. In this sense they can become objects of thought and worship. This unusual feature of Dooyeweerd's theory allows us to make sense of our comical vignette. The hunters do not shoot the crocodile because they have understood that the snapper has become an object of religious veneration. Crocodiles do not worship but they can be worshipped.

It should be obvious by now to the astute reader that humans function actively in all fifteen modes. For example when I am telling tall tales to innocent bystanders I will sometimes wink at close friends. I am alerting pals to my playful intentions. A wink can mean different things in different contexts. It can be a signal to shoot the crocodile. It can be a means of communicating warmth and affection to fellow hunters. It can signal mirth and jollification. Winking can be and often is an essentially aesthetic activity and we must stress that crocodiles never wink. You might think that a crocodile is winking at you ironically but you would be mistaken. He's just getting ready to pounce and eat you. The crocodile might be blinking but it is never winking. Intuitively we understand that humans can both blink and wink and this is part of their glory. Blinking is something we share with the higher animals. Winking ironically is unique to human-beings.

And this brings us to another key theme in Dooyeweerd's philosophy. Herman stresses again and again that these aspects are irreducible to each other. Simply stated reductionism occurs when the law for one aspect of creation is taken to be the law for another. Here's a simple way of explaining this thesis. Try as hard as you like - you can never in a million years explain the cheeky wink in terms of the laws of physics. Granted you need the laws of physics as a precondition of the winking activity but the essential meaning of the playful wink transcends the physical substratum. The aesthetic activity of winking rests upon the lower modes but cannot be reduced to them. In this sense winking can never be reduced to the physical mode.

When the empiricist (e.g. Hume) argues that the crocodile can be understood as a purely sensory entity, we must hold up our hands and cry – 'Foul, malodorous reductionism'. The crocodile has sensory properties but it cannot be reduced to those properties. Purely sensory things do not exist. When the Cartesian argues that the crocodile is merely a machine, a purely physical thing, we must stick out our tongues and cry – 'Sordid, vile reductionism'. The crocodile has physical properties but cannot be reduced to those properties. And even pebbles cannot be reduced to the physical aspect. As we have argued they function actively and passively in all the modes.

We now need to briefly examine Dooyeweerd's theory of social institutions. Sometimes philosophers are perceived as brainy boffins who are completely

impractical and out of touch with ordinary people. Sadly this reputation is often deserved. Agonising about the seventeen different meanings of the word 'if' does not arouse sympathy and intellectual longing in the ordinary non-philosopher who cleans, dusts and wipes dirty bottoms. By way of savage contrast, Dooyeweerd's social philosophy is enormously practical and relevant.

Consider the tragic, true story of Patricia Hilario da Silva. This young, Brazilian nine-year-old girl was murdered by a professional assassin. The hit-man left a 'calling card' on her dead body. It read as follows: "I killed you because you didn't study and had no future." In modern Brazil millions of children have been abandoned by their parents. These destitute orphans hang around on streets where shopkeepers believe that they irritate and annoy wealthy tourists. A typical scenario runs like this. A young child is begging for money and a local merchant decides to make a phone call to an off-duty policeman. The next day the child is found dead and a wad of notes is handed to an armed, uniformed man. There are now 11.5 million children living in absolute poverty in Brazil and Amnesty International claims that summary killing is now used as a form of population control.

In chapter 5 we discussed the social philosophies of Adam Smith and Auguste Comte. We noted that Smith understands society in terms of individuals and their right to maximise pleasure and profit. On the other hand we discovered that Comte believed in the priority of Humanity over individuals. Individualism leads to an emphasis on 'my rights' and 'my privileges'. Collectivism leads to self-sacrifice and altruism. We live for others. Dooyeweerd's social philosophy helps us to cut right through this false dilemma by spelling out the distinctive callings of diverse social institutions.

In modern Brazil we can distinguish between police officers, magistrates, government officials, business people, social workers, teachers, parents and church workers. All these offices or callings have a distinctive task. In simple terms God wants police officers to protect the innocent and to arrest the guilty. That's their divine calling. Government officials are mandated to further public justice. This might involve targeting special funds to help house orphans. That's their sacred task. Business people have a calling to produce goods and services, provide good jobs and pay people a fair wage. That's their job. Parents have a calling to raise children in a loving, safe and supportive atmosphere. That's their divine mission. That's their office. There are many such offices and they are all equally important.

Could you imagine the enormous change in the life and times of your typical Brazilian orphan if people started to faithfully serve God in all these different spheres of life. Wouldn't it be a total cracker? Instead of being murdered for a few quid Patricia would enjoy the full benefits of a loving family. Her mum and dad would have decent jobs and government officials would do all they could to maintain a just political community within which she and her family could thrive. Notice that the full flourishing of a loving family is dependent upon obedient responses in all the other spheres.

Dooyeweerd contended that each different sphere of life is qualified or defined by different aspects. For example family life is qualified by the ethical mode. This means that love is the essential feature of this social sphere. Business life is qualified by the economic; businesses are supposed to make money. Churches are qualified by the faith aspect; they are called to foster and deepen faith life. States or governments are qualified by the legal aspect; their principle concern is public justice.

Now here's where the multi-faceted feature of all these institutions kicks in and provides considerable light in this Brazilian darkness. Although a business company is called to be an economically qualified social unit, it must still conduct its business dealings in a loving way. The economic aspect must be opened up to the ethical dimension. Here is a simple illustration of this idea.

In 1974 Muhammed Yunus, a Bangladeshi University professor from a Muslim background lent 18 pounds to 42 totally destitute people who were shunned by ordinary banks and forced to borrow money from loansharks at very high rates of interest. By doing this he took these people out of the poverty trap and allowed them to set up tiny businesses selling for example, cakes or bamboo caskets.

As a result of this initial loan to these people, Muhammed Yunus has set up the Grameen bank which now lends billions of dollars to over 3 million people. Most of his customers are women and extremely poor. The Grameen bank is even lending money to beggars!

In the beginning orthodox bankers told Yunus that he was stark raving bonkers to even consider lending to very poor people because they had no assets. In other words they were not credit-worthy. The experts told Yunus that his bank was doomed to failure. And yet amazingly 98 per cent of all his loans are repaid in full plus the interest. This socially conscious bank has rescued millions of people from utter grinding poverty and transformed their lives. The Grameen bank has even been replicated in Norway and the USA.

Dooyeweerd would contend that banks have a calling to lend money and provide services in a way that is loving and just. It's not the same kind of institution as a family but it can be loving and merciful in ways that are appropriate to its sphere.

In conclusion we can say that Dooyeweerd's rich and fruitful theory helps us to understand both the natural world around us and the many social communities that we encounter in modern societies. This theory alerts us to reductionism in all its many expressions. Crocodiles are not rabbits and families are not banks.