

## Philosophy as schooled memory

by Calvin Seerveld

Once upon a time, to separate Reformational thinkers from ideologues, Hart took to speaking of philosophy as a tool. I heard H. Evan Runner use this terminology a couple times, hesitatingly, back in the 50s too. One still comes across this perspective occasionally, which is saying something like this:

The Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee is the best tool Christians doing philosophy have at present; so we should use it. When a better mousetrap is built, then we will use that. We are not wedded to Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven's philosophical method as Charles Saunders Peirce professed he was to his bride of Scientific Reason...! We follow Christ and are committed within his body; we do not believe in a manmade, systematic philosophy. Just as Barth thanked God he was not bound to Luther and Calvin the way Thomists were tied to Thomas, we may be thankful we can use Dooyeweerd's philosophy only as a good tool of the trade.

This position feels comfortable also to those who suffer from the "once bitten, twice shy" syndrome (cf Augustine after he was fooled by the Manichees). Once one is cured from having been an ideologue, one is tempted to curry a kind of "ecumenical tolerance" toward differing philosophies.

I honour the intent to keep our philosophical pattern of thinking humbled to continuing reform. Party-line scholastics are a burden to an original thinker's legacy because they are essentially Philistine, one-party disciples of a human thinker. And it is true that when any real *community* of philosophers ("the Amsterdam school") - rather than an eclectic assortment of diverse thinkers doing their thing under an assumed, common name ("Society of Christian Philosophers") - try to establish their Identity, the marks which distinguish their identity come at first to be hotly held. Given the factional infighting among professional philosophers, it doesn't take much to push deeply held convictions and years of training in a certain philosophical mold to the status of non-negotiables. And young students of such a philosophy can push it into surrogate gospel. "Ideology" is a word for thought-idolatry. "Tool" relativizes such passion.

But if philosophy is thought of as a tool, such thinking is liable to occasion error in conception and judgment that can greatly damage the edificatory power (=building durance) of Christian philosophical activity. Philosophy is not like a hammer or saw or forklift to pile things up into a corner. Philosophy has an instrumental side to it, but the "tool" bit of philosophic task is more like the FBI (under-cover critique) or Peace Corps (exploratory, agricultural service in foreign territory), than like the work of a mechanic, a tool diemaker, or an expert who repairs people's thoughts, cleans up their talk, or gives them a program to build the Great or a Marxist Society. Such use of philosophy, I think, denatures its gift to specialized interests, no matter how legitimate the interests. If philosophy as "tool" were to connote "architectural firm" that the special sciences like biology and psychology and political science and economic or literary theory call in when they want to think out a joint plan to help

them all think under one roof, fine. Or, if philosophy as “tool” casts the philosopher into the role of janitor to the sciences (instead of “king” to replace the ‘queen’), a kind of *ancilla scientiarum*, one may have a fairly accurate, partial picture of things. But philosophy is much more of a pace-setter among the many sciences than “tool” suggests. Philosophy is more like the basement of a building or its architecture than being the “tool” of a front door or fire escape to get in or out of a house.

Perhaps it would be better, however, to let the dead metaphor of “tool” go, and try to formulate the matter exactly. A philosophy is a categorical framework that is conceptually in place in someone’s consciousness and acts as a schooled memory in which one’s theoretic activity is embedded. A given person’s philosophy is always becoming and be-going, unless one settles into it like a rut. But the philosophy one “works” with is not something you have. The philosophy has you as theorist and scientist. Much as your mother-tongue, which you learn even before you can speak, determines your world of conversation, so one’s philosophy, veritably functioning as a schooled memory, becomes the reservoir shaping your idea and conceptual world.

Dozens of distinctions need to be made, and many supplementary points should be articulated, but right now I am after only one corrective, central point: philosophy is not a tool, it is not an instrument of thought, because philosophy is the fundamental thought-framework within which scientific thinking takes place. (My tentative position on this defining point harks back to the tradition of both Western and Eastern reflection of wisdom, before European positivism denied conceptual frameworks as committed-patterns and American pragmatism instrumentalized everything it touched.) Therefore a philosophy is much more deeply entrenched in one’s subconscious makeup, if one is Philosophically literate, than “tool” would make one think. Augustine’s insight on “willing,” that the more deeply the whole person is involved, the harder it is to will “freely”, is pertinent too, I think. To change one’s philosophy is almost as difficult, deep-going, and traumatic, as altering one’s personality through years of psychotherapy. A philosophy is not disposable or fixable or replaceable like a diaper or getting a new lawn-mower. A philosophy is one’s habit of schooled consciousness, the natural underwear or skin of very scientist and academic.

Let me make one terminological precision. In my book not everybody is philosophically active. Every human creature, I believe, lives out of some faith or other, existentially attached by *commitment* to the true God revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, or to a nogod. Every faith-committed human creature who is sane shows a way-of-life. Oftentimes one’s way-of-life may remain unconsciously operative, determining the (relative) cohesion of choices, priorities, and routine of daily activities one lives out. (This is so for isolated tribes of yesteryear and also applicable for many citizens of today’s secular society who have lost much conscious sense of the fact that their “normal” life-pattern is quite parochial, really, in the light of millennia of history, rather than universally valid, as they dumbly assume.)

Sometimes people become aware of their way-of-life which can be held but not expressed. I am willing to call such consciousness of (one’s) way-of-life a world-and-life-view, a *Weltanschauung*, a “vision” one is ready to “confess” in words or stories (cf myth), pictures and liturgy (cf rites), that one selfconsciously recognizes is

relative to others and believes to be true (or “better” than others). You don’t correct a crooked way-of-life by adopting a straight world-and-life-view.

A philosophy, as I understand it, is similar to a way-of-life and to a world-and-life-view (1) in its encyclopaedic, systematic compass, and (2) in its being a out-working of one’s underlying faith-commitment. But philosophy has an analytically defined consistency. Philosophy marks an educated consciousness trained in making careful distinctions and in identifying precise relationships. A philosophy takes a very conscious, considered stand on the interrelated meaning of things.

You don’t need a philosophy to be a Christian. You don’t even need a Weltanschauung to be a disciple of Christ. You need a walk with the LORD, the Way-of-life the Scriptures teach, for example, in Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 5-7, Romans 13:8-10. But if you have a confessional vision or Weltanschauung with your way-of-life, a Christian must make earnest in having them both biblically in line. (When one’s way-of-life and Weltanschauung happen to be at odds, one lives a troubled existence, for good or bad, depending on whether their coming in line follows the shalom of Christ’s Rule.)

Every academic and practising scientist - and that includes college and university students coming to think for themselves - are in the throes of being formed within, of firming up, or of altering a philosophical stance in their particular studies. The reason for this is that academic study is done within a categorical framework because one’s professional concepts and ideas are loaded by their assumed interconnection. For christian theory in any discipline a Christian philosophy is necessary. This is the rationale for the Institute for Christian Studies to exist in its task. A given philosophy is a result of certain philosophical thinking. But a philosophy is not inert, a residue. It may hang around a thinker’s neck like a dead albatross, but a philosophy serves more responsibly as a halo around one’s thinking. Like a schooled memory, I proposed, philosophy is the hidden reservoir one taps before one knows it when you reflect with scientific precision: the fund of experienced, ordered knowledge which orients one’s ongoing, controlled perception; the structured *a priori foci* one has adopted for tying definite thoughts together.

That is, while a philosophy is “a definite body of thought,” its substance is categories rather than concepts; and categories order analysis but are not themselves conceptual “answers”. Categories make answers possible. And a specific framework of categories limits the theoretical questions one asks to which one goes to find scientific answers. While admitting to thinking out of a categorical framework seems restrictive to a thinker proud of his tolerance, unless one has philosophic cohesion as a professional thinker, I dare say, you are eclectic, uncritical, or muddled.

The fashionable term since the 1960s has become “paradigm” or “model”. An insightful dissertation by J.H.Santema, which deserves more attention than it has received, distinguishes “knowledge models” and “manufacturing models”, and shows the pitfalls of confusing “technical diagrams that serve as blue-print instruments for making something” (MM) and “analytic constructs that teach one to identify key features of something” (KM). In my judgment a “categorical framework” is more part of a scientist’s human consciousness than either a

“knowledge model” or “manufacturing model”, and is even more fundamental a girder in advanced theory and scientific conception than what Kuhn argues for.

We all know how hard it is to talk across “paradigms” in philosophical debates. That difficulty is evidence of how deeply engrained a categorical framework is in one’s consciousness. That’s not bad, in my judgment. That is the nature of philosophy. But one should not avoid that trouble of communicating on theories of art or knowledge or dogma or historiography by playing down one’s philosophy as merely an (important) “tool”. No more than one should solve the problem by becoming a scholastic ideologue. Or be a candle-holder looking on by observing that philosophies are societally and historically conditioned and you, particular individual, have a particular societal history. Of course, but once one has come of age philosophically he or she stands with his or her philosophical conception as a working categorical embodiment of the truth, so help you God, or Reason or Utility. That’s why the clash between philosophers is bound to be as passionate as a vow - Peirce saw that correctly.

When one believes philosophy acts like a schooled memory, one will be less ready to try to turn it in for a new model to cut one’s conceptual grass. Teachers and students of philosophy of different fields will be extremely wary of the traditional philosophies of men come down to us from unbiblical sources, as living options today. And Christians will be more thankful for the categorical framework formed in the generation of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, Zuidema, Mekkes, K.J. Popma, van Riessen and sundry other saints. A reformation in cultural direction did happen historically once upon a time; Luther and Calvin were not just reformist. The same is true in philosophy, it seems to me: the neck of “reason” was radically broken, at heart, in the philosophy of the cosmomic idea. Its categorical framework is biblically directed, humbled enough to be rich in philosophical blessing, breathing a Reformed christian tradition that is still too little known in scholarly circles.

We can keep this schooled memory a diaconal ministry best by continuing reform of its Neo-idealist, phenomenological setting, and by giving away, in translation, its wisdom to our neighbour, recalling its key insights for giving conceptual direction that honours the Lord in issues of our day.