

1068. Naïve experience and a receptive attitude in life

Exploration of Dooyeweerd's notion of *naïve experience*

Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) is the author of the Reformational philosophy best known from his three-volume work *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. Arguably his most unique contribution to philosophy was his notion of *naïve experience*. In this article I want to explore this notion by way of introduction to an attempt to formulate a possible Reformed-Christian approach to psychotherapy. I will first try to formulate my understanding of what Dooyeweerd meant by this notion. Next, I will try to explore the possible additional meanings of the term *naïve*. Finally, I will attempt to articulate the historical debt Dooyeweerd's notion owes to the re-affirmation of the value of ordinary life by the sixteenth century Reformers such as Calvin, Luther and Zwingli.

Dooyeweerd's description of naïve experience: its place and function in life and its relation to theory/science

To get at what I think Dooyeweerd intended with his notion of naïve experience I have found it useful to split my account into a structural and a directional description. Vollenhoven in his *Introduction to Philosophy* first formulated the distinction between structure and direction. (1942, 2005, chapter 2). Next to Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven was the co-founder of the Dutch version of Reformational philosophy.

A structural description means to assert that naïve experience is a reality to which all human beings must respond regardless of their religious or ideological orientation. It is a creational given in everyone's life by virtue of the fact that they are human. So, structurally naïve experience is, for every human being, the place of religion, (or ideology, or spirituality), i.e. the place where we make a basic decision to live out of and unto something or Someone, which choice decisively colours or determines all that we think, know or do, including theory and science

A directional description means to assert that naïve experience is the place of religion where we decide to live our lives for or against God. This formulation pre-supposes a biblically informed choice that life ought to be lived for the creator-God, or a choice that life is to be lived against Him.

Because naïve experience is basic to human life, Dooyeweerd further asserts that our theoretical assertions and our scientific discoveries can never be said to be religiously or ideologically neutral (read objective).

Structural evidence for Dooyeweerd's assertion:

Empirical evidence for Dooyeweerd's assertion is found in the notion of 'paradigms' in Kuhn's *The structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The basic assumption of Post-Modernism that meta-narratives ought to be de-constructed provides additional support. Finally, the

existence of value plurality in today's global world, which points to the fact that there is more than one kind of normal possible lends credence to the reality of naïve experience.

The notion of *naïve experience* ought not to be equated with *everyday experience*

There seems to be a tendency among adherents of Reformational philosophy to equate naïve experience with every-day experience. However, today everyday human experience (at least in the developed world) is riddled with scientific pronouncements and is, therefore, not naïve. Dooyeweerd's argument that science deepens rather than abrogates naïve experience ignores the fact that science also has a fragmenting effect on our experience. (Especially younger) people process much of their experience today in terms of stand-alone bits of information derived from search engines on the Internet. This tends to give their experience an artificial, digitalized flavour, in which certain experiences become more noteworthy when they have "gone viral".

The notion of *theory* in Dooyeweerd is too distant from everyday experience and ought, therefore, to be replaced by *reflection*, which is a broader category

As I read Dooyeweerd, theorizing is characterized by abstract reflection. But *pre-theoretical* (better non-theoretical, or extra-theoretical) reflection is also characterized by abstraction. We simply cannot experience anything without some form of reflection and we cannot reflect on anything without some form of abstraction. Scientific reflection, (better yet: experimental reflection, which explores the relationship between two variables while deliberately holding all other variables constant) does indeed fragment the integrality of our immediate experience. But, as Gestalt Psychology has shown, everyday forms of abstraction, specifically perception, which focuses on parts of our experience as figure, can only be accomplished in an unbreakable relation to that which is not focused on as the figure's ground. Everyday cognition and memory appear to have the same structure. None of these necessarily disrupts the wholeness of human experience. In my view, the implication of Dooyeweerd's formulation is that it makes naïve experience too naïve and theoretical reflection too abstract.

Exploration of the notion of *naïve*

In this section I want to explore the possible meanings of the word *naïve* in the notion of naïve experience. As we do that I have to go beyond the meaning that Dooyeweerd assigned to it. But I believe that these meanings are implied in his formulations.

One of the possible meanings refers to the fact that naïve experience is *subjective* in the sense that it represents a basic choice by persons, societies or cultures. However, the formulation of naïve as subjective is meant to exclude the idea that naïve experience is a form of *subjectivism*, which holds that no appeal to something or Someone outside/beyond the human subject is possible.

The apparent paradox of Dooyeweerd's notion of naïve experience

This raises the concern, however, that on purely *structural* grounds Dooyeweerd's assertion may involve a paradox. Dooyeweerd always intended to offer his philosophy, including his notion of naïve experience, for critical discussion with other philosophers, including those who did not share his religious starting point. To do that he had to make his views available for empirical verification and falsification. Thus, to give his assertions credence he needed to appeal to the evidence of existing forms of subjectivism (Kuhn, Postmodernism, and the plurality of visions in today's global world). He had to make his notion of naïve experience amenable to others by arguing that like the others it too is a kind of subjectivism. However, this marked *his* assertion as yet another meta-narrative that needs to be unmasked/deconstructed down to its subjective base. This was clearly not Dooyeweerd's intention. Contrary to subjectivism he held that an appeal to something or Someone outside/beyond the human subject is possible.

In short, the reality base of naïve experience is open to empirical verification. Counter-intuitively, what saves Dooyeweerd's assertion from being subjectivistic is that on *directional* grounds he holds that naïve experience is the place of religion where we decide to live our lives for or against God.

This opens up his formulation to scrutiny and therefore open to (objective or inter-subjective) verification or falsification. It invites us to investigate whether reality is created and sustained by God or constructed by human beings. At the very least it raises the question which view of reality has the most heuristic value for making sense of our lives. This moves the discussion about naïve experience to the place where it belongs, the place where the discussion can occur between alternative views about what is the meaning or basic intent of living.

Mekkes and Vollenhoven's reformulation of naïve experience

The Dutch philosopher Johan Mekkes, Dooyeweerd's contemporary contributor to Reformational philosophy has redefined the basic directional question of for or against God as one of *listening or not listening*. In his view, structurally all of mankind is faced with this basic choice. The implication of this choice is that it behooves us to listen if reality is created and sustained by God, because then we live in a world already structured by God. However, if reality is constructed by human beings, as is often maintained, then reality consists of indifferent material, which human beings are duty-bound to shape towards human ends. (2010:30)

Vollenhoven offers the same suggestion by pointing to the two-fold meaning of the term *subject*. *Subject* can be defined as the source of its own activity, expressed as dominance over objects in pursuing one's self interest. But *subject* can also be taken to mean that human beings stand in subjection to, and are addressed by the (Divine) Other (Levinas), which then creates the possibility for activity and actualization in human life. (2005:xvii)

Naïve experience as the place to listen

We can now define *naïve experience* as the place where we are called to listen before we act. It redefines human abilities as responsibilities (literally as abilities to respond). It suggests that our basic responsibility in life is to adopt a receptive attitude toward the world and its Creator. This kind of listening means more than listening with our ears (or for that matter seeing with our eyes) in search of “information” (as in “surfing the net”). Rather, it means that we are called to listen (or to see) with our *lives*. What is intended with this basic responsibility is a lifestyle of receptivity (See my thought piece, *listening to nothing*)

This style of living is by no means easy. The hard part of choosing to take a listening attitude in life is that it requires an admission on our part that in and of our selves we know nothing and can do nothing. This further implies that the knowledge we seek to live by, or wisdom, is a gift we receive rather than an achievement we accomplish. From the perspective of a receptive lifestyle we must learn to love and respect this gift. It can only be acquired when we open ourselves up to it. We must let it master us.

Dooyeweerd asserts that at the root of a proper understanding of ourselves and our world, including how we are to live our lives, there is a religious choice for or against what we take to be the Origin of everything. I think he means the following: structurally speaking the *beginning* of all that we know naively and theoretically is a leap of faith (better of trusting) rather than an exercise of our intellect. Directionally speaking it involves a choice whether to concretely trust the Creator-God or something which He created as the Origin of all that exists.

Bible believers trust and confess, that God is the eternal Origin of everything that exists. This confession further entails that God *reveals* the structure and purpose of His creation to humankind. The world we live in and we ourselves also, this confession implies, are immediately knowable to us, provided that we trust His revelation.

The predominant view of human beings celebrated in the developed Western world is one of self-dependence or independence. Human life is not just a process (taking time to live) but also a *project* (in which we *make* a living). By way of contrast, the view of human beings confessed in the Bible is one in which their central characteristic is said to be their utter dependence on the creatures of the world they inhabit, and in this way demonstrating their dependence on God Who created all that exists. This view implies a non-active, open, receptive stance toward the world, in essence a central and life wide dependence on God Who created all that exists.

Structurally, trust in God’s revelation means that we take a listening attitude toward the world we live in, where we allow the things of the world to speak to us with authority, including their relationship to their Origin, prior to any thought or action on our part concerning their nature (see my *Listening to nothing*). Trust in God’s revelation means allowing the creatures that surround us to tell us who or what they are in our lives.

When we take this stance, the created world we inhabit opens up to our reflection, including our theorizing. A biblical picture of mankind in creation entails a factual immediacy of the world toward human beings. Reality thus conceived is immediately knowable and lends itself to human actions we are called to perform.

Historical background of Dooyeweerd's notion of *naïve experience*

Dooyeweerd's notion of naïve experience becomes especially intelligible when we see that historically he was a Dutch child of the Reformation. Naïve experience finds its historical root in the affirmation of ordinary life by the Sixteenth Century Reformers. The Reformation was a re-affirmation of the value of ordinary life. *Re*-affirmation because it was already prefigured in Judaeo-Christian spirituality. The Reformation merely gave a renewed impetus in the modern era to this Old Testament biblical teaching. (See p.213, p.218, of *Sources of Self* by Charles Taylor.)

During the Middle Ages and for centuries thereafter the dominant power in the Western world was the Hierarchy, i.e. the rule of the Church clergy, (the priests and the monks) not just over church life but over all of life, including eternal life. These clergy saw themselves as more sacred, more holy than the rest of the people, the laity. Because of their special status they saw themselves mediating between the laity and God. Without their intervention, it was taught, no one could hope to enter eternal life upon death! The Reformers rejected the special sacredness of church life and the religious necessity of church mediation out of hand. Each person, they held, can have a direct relationship to God, depending solely on their commitment to Him in their ordinary activities in their ordinary life. This sanctification of the ordinary made all of life sacred. They held that

ordinary life is more than profane. It itself is hallowed and in no way second class [to church life.]. The foundation for the re-valuation of ordinary life...was one of the most fundamental insights of the Jewish-Christian-Islamic religious tradition *that God as Creator himself affirms life.* (emphasis mine)

This reaffirmation of ordinary life led to an explosion in art, commerce and science, because this new faith was “strongest among artisans, tradesmen and small landowners”. (231) We see this Reformed emphasis work itself out in Dutch life, for example in Seventeenth Century Dutch genre painting. Dutch art of that time featured a celebration of the mundane. Instead of making paintings of saints and heroic figures of Greek mythology, Dutch artists painted everyday objects and persons in ordinary settings, or land and seascapes familiar to the Dutch. Dutch art of that time has an unassuming character that expresses the penchant of the Dutch for *nuchterheid*, (down-to-earthness) and their desire *to act 'normal'*. (Doe maar gewoon, dan doe je gek genoeg) (See especially Schama: *The Embarrassment of Riches*)

Properly understood these characteristics can be found back in the notion of naïve experience. In my view the central feature of this notion is a celebration of the power of unassuming ordinariness and vulnerability as the essence of being human.