

## Dooyeweerd's 'Dilemma' Revisited

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### Abstract

This study looks at Dooyeweerd's first article ever for *Philosophia Reformata* from the perspective of his later development. 'The Dilemma for Christian Philosophical Thought and the Critical Nature of the Philosophy of the Cosmological Idea' (*Philosophia Reformata*, 2018, 267-278; originally 'Het Dilemma voor het Christelijk wijsgeerig denken en het kritisch karakter van de Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee', *Philosophia Reformata* 1936, 3-16) appears to be quite fundamental. It is still relevant today. For it touches on the nature of all philosophy, Christian philosophy included. Some of the basic problems of Christian philosophy appear when we analyse the dilemma Dooyeweerd here brings to the fore. How can Christian philosophy criticize humanistic thought while at the same time avoid being sucked into the scholastic thought forms of nature and supernature? And how can it criticize these thought forms without criticizing what is genuinely Christian in Roman Catholicism? This dilemma is indeed basic. It touches directly on the question: What is Christian philosophy, and what is it not?

### Faith and Science

Sometimes faith and science seem light-years apart. If we then expect something from both of them, we have a problem of consciousness. Such problems have always been for philosophy to deal with. Philosophy is the guardian of epistemology, the science of all consciousness. Or so it seems.

When I first learned about science, I did indeed meet with some such problems in relating faith and science. Then I heard about a philosopher who had developed a "transcendental critique", in which the relation between faith and science was supposed to be fully explained. I am not quite sure today what I then expected professor Dooyeweerd's contribution to be. Would he prove the truth of Christianity? Would he defend the right of faith? Would he attack science?

It turned out that he did not try to prove the truth of Christianity. Rather, it became clear to me that one of his prior interests was to critically investigate the most basic traditional conceptions about Christianity and its truth. In fact, Dooyeweerd came to question the traditional conception of truth itself. The nature of Christianity appeared to be a major problem in his thinking. Yet he did attempt to make the truth of Christianity understandable. These points will be addressed below.

If Dooyeweerd did not try to prove the truth of Christianity, did he then defend the right of faith? Indeed, that is what he did. He built a strong case against the supposed self-sufficiency of theoretical reason (including the sciences). This case can be interpreted as a defense of religious faith: all theoretical thought starts from religious presuppositions. Such is the most common interpretation of Dooyeweerd's *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.

Much to my relief, Dooyeweerd never attacked science as such. Quite the contrary, he in fact defended the rightful place of the sciences in the whole of reality. He may even be interpreted as saying that they play a role in the coming

of the Kingdom of God. That would be no exaggeration. But he did criticize science and philosophy in so far as they assume that theoretical thought reigns supreme within its own domains. He showed that a truly critical philosophy reckons with all conditions for theoretical thought. That would be the kind of philosophy which in one stroke criticizes the supposed self-sufficiency of reason as well as the supposed self-evident character of “Christianity”.

### **Man’s cosmic situation “religious”**

A human being (henceforth “man”) is continuously being brought forth. He does not produce himself. Neither has he any being in himself. His life is continuously being received by him and he has to continuously leave hold of it. There is no holding on to life. Such is the nature of life’s time. We are being moved from moment to moment.

Being humanly alive implies the experience of self. Man is an ego, and as such he is meaning, that is to say, he refers to and expresses “everything else” in the cosmic coherence (Dooyeweerd 1935, 5). The self is a cosmic self, that is to say, its reality is only what it is in coherence with the rest of the cosmos. Man is nothing in himself, but has his being in relatedness.

But then, there is a hole in the bucket. Man misses the fullness of meaning that appears to be inherent as a promise in his being alive. Dooyeweerd leaves no question as to what we are to think of “fullness of meaning”: it is radical love, the kind of love that fills our being from the root upwards (Dooyeweerd 1969, 506). However, the reality of man comprises his inherent opposition against not owning his being. This, according to Dooyeweerd, is the root-cause of his lack of meaning.

But there is a third aspect to human reality, namely the possibility of liberation from the addiction to the lack of radical love. In short, the situation in which man experiences himself is one of a threefold basic dynamics. In the terms of Dooyeweerd’s “groundmotive”: creation, fall and redemption. The impulse of the dynamics of human life is threefold.

It has been very difficult for philosophy to recognize the truth of this situation. That cannot be surprising, since it is difficult for man as such to look in the mirror and see the truth of his reality. It takes quite a lot to get to that truth. As Dooyeweerd says, we are to be “revealed to ourselves” (1972, 189). Here we have his idea of revelation: revelation addresses man in his subjective existential need and reveals man to himself as a personal focus of heartfelt passion. The revelation of myself to myself implies the revelation of the origin of my being and of the fullness of my meaning. Revelation is the Word of life speaking to my heart. It is not supernatural but cosmically-real.

But just as man finds it difficult to recognize the truth of his existence, precisely because his reality implies his penchant for the opposite of reality – it is difficult for man to not be the owner of his own life –, even so philosophy has its own peculiar trick to oppose reality. It sets up “reason” as the origin of man’s being. The history of Western thought shows an impressive tradition of boosting Reason in every conceivable way.

## **Transcendental critique**

At this point Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique sets in. Its point is to prove that theoretical reason is by no means self-sufficient. Theoretical thought presupposes real time and always issues from a live thinker, who as such is always in search of the meaning of his life. That is why there cannot be an impersonal philosophy about the meaning of life. Thus Dooyeweerd can say that all philosophy is necessarily "religious" in nature, for religion is defined by him as the innate impulse of the self to search for the Origin of his being and for the fullness of life's meaning (1969, 57).

So, Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique, which is to lay bare the relation between the human self and theoretical thought, has to address the tricks of Reason. There appear to be three main tricks. The first one is to set up a scheme in which Reason declares reality to be of the same nature as itself. This is the dualistic scheme of matter and form. Matter is alien to Reason. If it is not opaque, it is fluid. In no way is it clear and distinct, so as to be accessible for Reason. Form, by contrast, is the kind of thing Reason is at home with. Reason draws on definitions. So, we see Greek philosophy make a basic opposition between matter and form. Matter is on the side of the body, form is on the side of spirit with its Reason. Matter is inferior to spirit. Spirit is divine. This is in fact a projection, we could say, of the human logical function: God according to the image of thinking, rational man.

The second trick of Reason is the scholastic trick of the Mediaeval thinkers. Here we see the attempt to synthesize Greek philosophy with Biblical revelation. But since Greek philosophy took theoretical reason for its ultimate origin, this attempt, in spite of many efforts to the contrary, resulted in the adaptation of Biblical revelation to theoretical reason. As a result, faith became theologized, Christianity was reduced to a world-and-life-view, and revelation was understood as primarily addressing man's rational cognition, rather than his heart. Moreover, since the deification of theoretical thought implies the deification of the form-aspect of reality, the matter-aspect, time included, is degraded. It becomes something inferior or even worse: the principle of error, evil and sin. Time is robbed of meaning. The basic time-nature of reality is left beyond the reach of the fullness of meaning, which is to say that fullness of meaning is not to be found in creation.

The third trick of Reason can be characterized as the attempt to carry over the supposed autonomy of Reason into the field of freedom. At the beginning of the modern era, science discovered that there are rather stable laws of nature. These laws are universal. They hold not only for the sun and the planets, but also for nature on earth. However, they are deterministic: the position of Jupiter twelve years from now can today be calculated on the basis of these laws. But then, if the fate of celestial things can by computation be figured out in advance, so in principle can the behavior of man, for the laws of nature are universal. It then follows that man's reality is just as determined as the reality of the celestial bodies. Where does this leave the freedom of man? This third trick of Reason involves a nasty surprise: nature kills freedom. In reaction to it we see in modern philosophy all sorts of attempts to declare man even more free than he already supposed himself to be in his autonomous theoretical thinking.

How can these three tricks, these erratic groundmotives, be understood as attempts to answer to the innate impulse to reach for the origin of meaning and why could they but fail? The easy answer is as follows.

All these groundmotives follow directly or indirectly from the setup of an origin in the form of Reason. Philosophy ever since continued in the tradition thus founded. But it is obvious that the attempt to set up any origin can only arise from man's need. His need originates from his heart: that is what needs by their very nature do. However, by taking the route of Reason, bypassing the human heart, man misses the point. This is the common cause why all these groundmotives failed.

Thus Dooyeweerd's transcendental critique, laying bare the relations between man's manishness and his theoretical thinking, can indeed be seen as an answer to the problems in the relation between faith and science. In faith we may be said to follow the religious impulse of our heart and let ourselves be oriented towards the fulfillment of our meaning. In science we are thinking theoretically. As such there need not be any friction between the two. The friction arises when we bypass the root of our being and set up an autonomous science, suggesting that by this move we can reach to the origin. This is where the basic mistake lies, and the ultimate cause of the friction. There is nothing wrong with theoretical thinking, neither in the guise of philosophy nor in the form of science. Quite the contrary. We only suffer when we leave ourselves exposed to the suggestion that theoretical thinking can answer the need of our heart. It cannot. All that science can tell me about me is but very general, abstract, and impersonal. It does not touch me in the confusion and the needs of my heart. That is to say, it does not address me as *myself*, as this being with a heart that is a personal focus (Dooyeweerd 1940, 182) of burning passion. The individual concrete subjectivity of my ego is beyond the reach of abstractive theoretical thought.

### **The philosopher and his philosophy**

Basically there are three different attitudes in philosophy. In the traditional attitude, of "immanence-philosophy" (Dooyeweerd 2018, 268-269), the philosopher acts as if theoretical thinking as such is self-sufficient. In the opposite attitude, pointed out by Dooyeweerd, the basic premiss is that it is not possible for theoretical philosophical thought to hold up its own pants. There is also a third attitude. This is the scholastic one. Here the attempt is made to synthesize self-sufficient philosophy with Christian faith. The scholastic idea is that theoretical thought is self-sufficient in its own sphere, but that this sphere is limited in that theoretical thought is not able by itself to fathom the full depth of meaning of the cosmos, human personality and divine reality. Hence, we need additional "supernatural" revelation (Dooyeweerd 2018, 268, 277).

But Dooyeweerd's emphasis is on the fact that theoretical thinking is *not* self-sufficient *in its own sphere*. The idea that it could be stems from a lack of insight into the real nature of the relation between philosophical thinking and the concrete self that is doing the thinking. Dooyeweerd argues why this is a mistaken view. He warns that this does not imply that this mistaken view is unscientific. No, but it is mistaken science.

The mistake concerns the *possibility* of philosophy. How is theoretical philosophy possible? The inquiry into this problem is the critical transcendental inquiry into the necessary universal conditions for genuine philosophy. Without such a critical inquiry it is very easy to fall prey to unconscious presuppositions. That would be uncritical, that is to say, dogmatic.

So, (1) how is theoretical thinking possible? Obviously it is not possible without a living thinker. As a live human being, he is a concrete subjective self. Both he and his thinking have their reality in the coherence of cosmic time. From this the question (2) follows concerning the structure and the meaning of this situation. The third question is: (3) When and at which point does thinking stop asking theoretical questions about meaning for the reason that further questioning is meaningless? In other words, what is the origin of meaning and how do we attain to it?

These preliminary questions, concerning time, self, meaning, and origin, are *intrinsic* to the nature of *all* philosophy. It is impossible that they are not implicitly or explicitly answered. Therefore, even if hidden to the philosopher himself, we find such an answer at the base of every philosophy. This answer takes the form of what Dooyeweerd calls the philosophical ground-idea (2018, 270). The problems and the internal direction of each and every philosophy are effectively determined by its specific ground-idea.

So, it appears (1) that we need to ask the philosophical question “How is philosophy possible?” Then (2) we find that philosophy is possible by a living human being who finds himself in cosmic time-coherence and as such “in relation to” the origin of meaning. Then (3) we find that this human being lives with three questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of my time and my situation in the cosmos? What is the Origin of all meaning and how can I attain to it? In the fourth place, (4) we find that implicitly or explicitly man has an idea in which these questions are answered. This amounts to the following. To the question “How is philosophy possible?” the answer is: by a live man and his questions and answers concerning the meaning of his reality.

What light does this shed on the initial question concerning the supposed self-sufficiency of theoretical philosophy? Dooyeweerd’s answer is that theoretical philosophy cannot be self-sufficient because of this fourfold state of affairs. For the ground-idea, in which the questions concerning time, self, meaning and origin find their answer, *directs the immanent course of theoretical thinking*. Hence, *in its own sphere*, theoretical philosophy is not self-sufficient.

### **Theory and religion**

The question can be asked: How is this different from the “halfway house” (Dooyeweerd 2018, 278) of scholasticism? All philosophical ground-ideas are of a religious nature, even in their theoretical function. In each of them the human I shows its innate heart tendency towards the Origin. So, if we substitute the Christian ground-idea for the ground-idea in general, we find that the three transcendental questions are answered as follows: 1. Who am I? – I am a child of God. 2. What is the fullness of meaning of my being? – Root love. 3. What is the Origin of meaning? – God the Creator, the Source and being of original love. But

these answers are not different from the scholastic answers to these questions. So, what then would be the difference?

It seems that it is this: These answers govern the *internal direction of theoretical thinking*. This is different from scholasticism, for there it was assumed that “natural reason” could well proceed without these basic ideas, that it should go about its business without them, and that in fact it had done so ever since its Greek beginnings.

Dooyeweerd's objection against this assumption is very serious indeed: it obfuscates the nature of religion or, which amounts to the same, it obfuscates the real cosmic situation of the human being. It distorts my understanding of myself and of my Origin. But if this assumption, that theoretical thought is self-sufficient within its own sphere, is mistaken, as Dooyeweerd claims it is, we may expect him to show how the various ground-ideas are always effectively determining theoretical philosophy internally. Dooyeweerd amply meets this requirement. He shows that the ground-idea of Greek philosophy is the dualistic idea of matter and form, and that this ground-idea determines the way all problems were approached, formulated and thought through. Secondly, he shows that in “Christian” Mediaeval philosophy thinking in terms of nature and super-nature is affected by the matter-and-form scheme of the Greeks. This explains the tendency to associate God with eternal form, and matter and time with its opposite, as well as the tendency to identify man with his reason. In the third place, Dooyeweerd shows how modern philosophy is basically affected by the scheme of nature and freedom. It is a large part of Dooyeweerd's effort to show that and how indeed philosophical ground-ideas are at work in directing the internal movements of thought in philosophy. Moreover, he states that the non-Christian, dualistic groundmotives miss the unity of Origin. Thus they cannot but divide human reality in two opposing poles (form/matter, supernature/nature, freedom/nature).

### **The internal sphere of philosophy**

There is another question at this point. It too concerns the relation between the inner sphere of philosophy and man's innate heart impulse to search for his Origin. It is the converse of the question concerning the dependence of theoretical philosophy upon its ground-idea. Dooyeweerd defines theoretical philosophy in a narrow way: It is the abstractive activity in which the basic modal aspects of reality are being analyzed. In his transcendental critique he relates this abstractive activity to the concreteness of the abstractor and to his existential situation. It seems then that this relating of the abstract to the concrete is itself a philosophical enterprise. And the question that this raises is this: Does Dooyeweerd redefine the internal sphere of philosophy by enlarging it?

At first sight it may seem that he does not. His initial claim is that he only reminds theoretical philosophy of the basic preliminary question concerning its possibility. It may then appear that this possibility is dependent upon another “sphere”, namely the “sphere” of religion and faith. But then, when he delves deeper into this possibility, he finds the concrete man with his concern for meaning, *and he claims that theoretical philosophy is not possible without the real philosopher and his questions and ideas about meaning.*

In a sense, therefore, the philosopher becomes part of the philosophy. If we take the personal role of the philosopher in theory seriously, the philosophy without the philosopher appears to be an abstraction.<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed what Dooyeweerd meant. It follows directly from the fact that he intended to make philosophy dependent upon the personal answers of the live man. It is not at all a shortcoming that philosophy is only what it is in its dependence upon the personal answers of the philosopher. In fact, this is an adequate expression of the real situation of every man and of every man's theoretical thinking. Every man, as a person, as a subjective totality, is directly towards the Origin. In all eternity of all time every human ego is absolutely unique and real in spite of himself. Therefore, there *is* in reality no other answer but a personal answer.

So, did Dooyeweerd redefine the area of philosophy by enlarging it? Yes, he did. Besides abstractive theoretical philosophy in the narrow sense, as the analysis of the basic modal concepts of the special sciences, we have the philosophical "prolegomena" of Dooyeweerd's *New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, in which the basic issues concerning the relation between theory and religious existence are explained. But clearly, these prolegomena are part of philosophy itself: their question "How is philosophy possible?" is as such a philosophical question. And the answer to this question is a philosophical answer.

We have seen that the answer to this question implies an answer to the questions Who am I? What is the fullness of meaning of my cosmic situation? What is the Origin of meaning? From this it follows that the answers to these questions – I am as a creature being brought forth in spite of myself, the fullness of my meaning is radical ("religious") love, the Origin of radical love is the Origin of cosmic reality – are as such philosophical in nature.

### **The Dilemma continued**

Let us return to Dooyeweerd's argumentation in his 'Dilemma' article. We already noticed that he pointed to the question of the relation of the self and its thinking to cosmic time. This is one of the issues addressed in the threefold ground-idea. Dooyeweerd then proceeds to point out that already the first of these questions, concerning the relation between the self and its thinking, is sufficient to face us with the problem of the self-sufficiency, yes or no, of philosophy.

We may theoretically dissect reality in order to oppose its different modal aspects to one another in our consciousness. We then get to a view of their diversity. But we also need a view of their deeper unity (Dooyeweerd 1969, 5) in order to get to an understanding of their coherence and the totality of their meaning. But since it is in the nature of theory to dissect, the theoretical view remains dispersed in the diversity of the aspects that have been opposed to one another. Therefore, we need a point of view "above" that diversity.

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<sup>1</sup> Such an abstraction is not useless. In fact, a philosophy without a philosopher aims at universal validity. That is to say, students of philosophy may recognize the universal truth expressed in it. They then, in their turn, become the live philosophers, appropriating the insights of the founder, and taking in a sense his original position. In this way, philosophical understanding may be expected to grow, since every new generation of thinkers has no choice but to appropriate the tradition in its own live way (no matter how stale that way may have become).

Adherents of the self-sufficiency of theoretical thought will say that theory is by itself able to come up with this point of view. Dooyeweerd argues that because of the inevitable dispersing nature of theory this is not possible. The so-called “Archimedean point” (a terminology which Dooyeweerd soon left behind) which is necessary for the required view cannot be furnished by theoretical thinking itself. In fact, he argues, the claim that theory can by itself furnish us with a view of totality, as such implies a view of that totality. For it is an implicit decision about the relation between the self and its theory: the choice for a supposedly immanent Archimedean point implies that the self can be subsumed under Reason and that it can be understood theoretically.

This would be contrary to the real situation of man as he finds himself, namely as subjectively originating. There is nothing between the human I and the Origin of its meaning, not even theoretical reason. The Biblical view of man, as directly to God, but alienated from Him and redeemed by His grace, appears to have a decisive significance for the entire structure of human existence, including its philosophizing.

By contrast, humanistic philosophy, following Descartes, has always attempted to find its Archimedean point in the activity of theoretical thinking itself (Dooyeweerd 2018, 272) rather than in the real structure of human existence as in “relation” to its Origin. Everything of creation can be doubted, says Descartes. But thinking cannot doubt itself, for that would be its own self-annihilation, which is impossible: thinking cannot cancel thinking. Therefore, according to Descartes, the unshakeable universally valid foundation of all philosophy is the activity of thought.

Obviously, this Cartesian view touches on the relation between the self and its theoretical thinking. The question returns: is the concrete subjective self subsumed under its own activity, or does the activity presuppose the self?

When we follow the history of modern thought from Descartes to Hume, we find indeed that philosophy, by its choice to look for its starting point within theory itself, was never able to rise above the diversity of the modal aspects. It never got to a view of their totality. It never attained to the root unity of the human self. The self remained caught in the diversity. Descartes remained caught within the specialty of the mathematical, while Hume remained caught within the specialty of the psychological. More recently we find philosophy reducing everything to the specialty of history. The necessary result of choosing one’s Archimedean point within theory is in all cases an absolutization of some special point of view. Hence, the totality of the whole is never attained.

This is unavoidable. Theoretical thought has no choice but to remain dispersed in the special modalities that it places in abstraction over against itself and in opposition to each other. The deeper unity, the totality, can in that way never be found.

The reverse of this choice of position by immanence philosophy is that the I of “I think” takes on the specific meaning of the special mode that it absolutizes. Descartes’s ego was a mathematical ego, Hume’s was a psychological one. The I of historicism is an historical ego, etc.

Now, with Kant it may seem that there is a way out of this quagmire. It is then assumed that there is a transcendental-critical method by which we can

reach the point above the diversity. It is not necessary, in this view, that we remain stuck to a special modal point of view. Reflexive thought can in all cases rise above its own modally qualified point of view. In that way it can supposedly reach to a subjective logical pole of thought above the diversity, via mere logical reflection.

But Dooyeweerd will not buy this either. It is an illusion that we will in this way really get beyond the dispersing diversity. The assumed transcendental logical pole of thought is in fact not real at all. It is a mere theoretical abstraction, which as such presupposes the actual abstractor. There is no actuality in it. All actuality of fact in this abstraction resides in the concrete man who merely fancies this pole of thought for himself. The concrete I remains presupposed by the act of thinking and by the illusions it produces. The abstractor will never coincide with its abstraction.

It is the individual concrete self that is always the centre of human existence and its activities. When philosophy in its search for totality bypasses the concreteness of man, it must necessarily miss that totality. Only the full self can fundamentally direct thought in its view of totality. Even in philosophies that seek their foundation in their theoretical activity as such, it is the self that performs the action. It therefore needs to be included in the theoretical view of totality.

It follows that really critical thought is only possible on the basis of true self-knowledge, that is, on the basis of knowledge of the self by the self. It can only be true if the subjective self recognizes itself as being brought forth in its particular, cosmic, way and as personally and radically concerned about its meaning. Such radical concern is the ultimate concern of man, the concern of the passions of his heart. Dooyeweerd's conceives of the human being as personally centered in its existential focus: the heart is a focus. Therefore, true self-knowledge is "religious": it is knowledge in which man's innate impulse towards the Origin of his meaning is satisfied. It is knowledge of the heart: it presupposes and needs an "answer" that addresses man in his heart's passions. Such is the nature of revelation. There is nothing supernatural about it.

Thus, in the light of divine revelation, it is impossible to view self-sufficient theoretical thought as a natural pre-amble to supernatural truths, as is the view of scholasticism. The passions and the revelation precede the theoretical activity.

It is objected from the side of Thomistic thinkers that in this way "nature is devoured by grace" (Dooyeweerd 2018, 277), and that this puts dogmatic obstacles in the way of the philosophical discussion. But, says Dooyeweerd, since man's nature as a self is not centered in reason but in his heart, it is either-or. There is no possibility of a synthesis between these opposites. Nor does it help to resort to the view that human reason is merely analogous to divine reason, and that it therefore is not self-sufficient in an absolute sense. This view is of no avail, since it hides the difference between darkened reason and enlightened reason. The functional structure of reason is the same in either case. Logical thinking will be logical thinking (Dooyeweerd 2018, 278). So, in no way is nature eaten by grace. The only question is: will reason express the reality of the human heart and the goodness of divine grace?

So, what is the “Dilemma for Christian Philosophical Thinking”? It appears to be this: Will Christian philosophy attempt the inherently contradictory synthesis with the standpoint of the supposed self-sufficiency of theoretical reason or will it choose the only option in accordance with the true situation of concrete living men? In the real situation of living men there is in fact no possibility for a person to make himself subordinate to impersonal, abstractive theory, even though he may think so. In all cases man has no option but to decide about the meaning of his existence by a love choice of his heart. Only out of the heart can the fullness of meaning be lived and experienced. Philosophy is bound to reflect this in the self-understanding of its nature and its structure.

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