

A Synopsis of Dooyeweerd's Theory of Time

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Augustine held that we know what time is but that we cannot say what it is. Dooyeweerd interpreted this relation of knowing and not knowing as the relation between time in primary experience and time in theoretical analysis. He came to the conclusion that on the immanence standpoint, the universal temporal meaning coherence of the cosmos is bound to be misinterpreted (1953-1958, 2:552).

Cosmic time is the bottom layer of our cosmic being. And it is experienced as such. This is time as the universal temporal meaning coherence of cosmic reality, which we know as long as nobody asks us to give an account of it. It is the continuous coherence of time as passing that makes for its intimate familiarity, as well as for our difficulty to give an account of it. As soon as we leave our primary *enstasis* and try to step back from reality as given, we get lost: the coherence of time immediately escapes us.

We could try to force an understanding of time by pretending that our real starting point lies in our theoretical attitude. This is the characteristic manner of immanence philosophy, which identifies reality with its appearance from our position in theory and also implicitly identifies our self with the self as in the theoretical attitude. However, neither the world as in theory nor the self as in theory is primary. Therefore, we need to investigate the primary nature of cosmos, self, and theory. It then appears that everything, even the very self, is meaning: everything refers to and is expressive of everything else; and the whole referential and expressive totality refers to an origin of meaning. It follows that the issues for all philosophy are essentially religious. Our cosmic experience—our self-experience included—implies a reference to its origin. Since immanence philosophy is not able to come to terms with cosmic time in its continuous coherence, it cannot come to terms with the self either, let alone with the origin of cosmic reality and experience. The meaning of our reality escapes us. That makes cosmic reality religious.

This does not mean that we only get to know time in its continuous integrality of past, present, and future by a supratheoretical “religious knowledge.”¹ Time’s integrality is already known to us in our primary experience and in our very being. Therefore, primary experience as such is religious. For the same reason, philosophical experience has to be related back to our primary experience.

Time’s continuous coherence is its primary reality forcing itself upon us. But when the starting point in primary experience is overlooked, some mode of time is absolutized. That mode is then taken for the common denominator of all experience and all time. After all, philosophy is the theory of totality. However, we cannot in any way form a theoretical concept of time in its continuous bottom layer. The attempt to do so implies an inversion of the real state of affairs, which is that continuous time is the *condition* for the theoretical enterprise. The attempt to reverse this ontic state of affairs causes the entire conception of time’s horizon to become warped. All modes of our temporal horizon become subordinate to the absolutized mode, rather than being equally irreducible. By the same token, the primary sphinxlike nature of the ego is bound to be misunderstood, for it is no longer possible to recognize that the cosmos, cosmic time, modal diversity, and modal coherence presuppose the human ego. The attempt must then be made to subsume the ego under one of its abstractions. Finally, the meaning character of cosmic reality, its universal referring and expressing, is mistaken, for meaning is conceived as originating from the absolutized mode.

Notwithstanding Augustine’s clever observation that we know what time is but that we cannot say what it is, we can in fact make a few articulate judgements about time as concretely given in our primary experience. In the first place, we all know that time is *continuous*; it does not take a break. In the second place, we know that time is *irreversible*; after Monday and Tuesday, we cannot again have the same Monday. This irreversibility is often referred to as

¹ This appears to be the view ascribed to Dooyeweerd by Brüggemann-Kruijff (1981, 1982).

time's arrow. Time is directed in its continuity: it is always only going toward the future, from the actual present to the immediately continuous "next" present. These elementary insights concerning temporal duration are known to everybody.² They determine the temporal sense of before and after, they are at the base of the proper (*eigenlijke*) criterion for time order, and hence, they are at the base of Dooyeweerd's theory of the cosmic order of time (Dooyeweerd 1940, 194).

Dooyeweerd's theory is based on the criterion that there is no time apart from duration and on the fact that there is no reality apart from duration. Therefore, the ego's supratemporality shares in the durational nature of everything real. Yet, there are texts by Dooyeweerd that appear problematic in view of this conclusion.

In the first place, is it not clear from *A New Critique* (1:31–33) and from Dooyeweerd's (1939) discussion of the *aevum* that the supratemporal is distinct from the temporal? In this latter discussion, in his article "Het tijdsprobleem en zijn antinomieën op het immanentiestandpunt II," Dooyeweerd explains that the *aevum* is an actual state of *concentrating* and of *transcending* that has to be realized again and again (1939, 5). Referring to the modal diversity of the aspects and to the horizon of time (*ibid.*, 5, 6), he is talking about time as it appears in the view of the philosopher, that is, time as in theoretical *disstasis*. Therefore, the actual state of concentration must be the philosopher's self-concentration. This actual concentration process *presupposes* the "center of religious concentration" (*ibid.*, 5). That the *aevum* is a process means that it is temporal. Therefore, it does not clarify the relation of time to the supratemporal. Moreover, the meaning of *between* as in "between time and true eternity" (*ibid.*, 2) is completely undefined. What the supratemporality of the ego is and how it is related to time must be established on different grounds.

Dooyeweerd makes it plain that the concentration point of *philosophic thought* is not to be sought in time, and that we only gain

² For example, some Frisian people have a wall tile that reads: "De tiid hâldt gjin skoft" (Time does not take a break).

the experience of something that transcends the modal diversity in the religious concentration of the radix of our existence upon the absolute Origin. “In this concentration we transcend cosmic time” (1953–1958, 1:31n1). Again, this is about the concentration of the philosopher; it is the philosopher who has to transcend the horizon of cosmic time. But this quotation makes it unambiguously clear that the concentration point of philosophic thought is not to be sought in time. Doesn’t that point to something beyond duration, to an eternal or semi-eternal concentration point in self-consciousness?

Dooyeweerd is pointing the philosopher away from the *disstasis* to something that transcends it. This can only be the radix of the philosopher’s cosmic reality and experience, his or her very self. It is not to be concluded that Dooyeweerd had something “extradurational” in mind, but merely something that cannot be found within the horizon of the abstracted aspects. Again, this does not yet answer the question of whether this center is extratemporal or not.

In the second place, there is the problem of time “breaking” meaning into a diversity, especially in conjunction with the inability of time to contain the religious fullness of meaning (Dooyeweerd 1953–1958, 2:4). At first sight, this may appear as if the fullness of meaning is something substantial. Because time, for some reason, is unable to contain this fullness, it has been chopped up. But nobody seriously thinks that Dooyeweerd is guilty of substantialism. Yet, is this breaking not the very reason why the radical unity has to transcend time?

The figure of breaking is related to the figure of the prism. The origin of both these figures lies in the process of the theoretical *epochè*. In that process, we gain the experience that, during our theoretical reflection, the continuity of our real act of thought is interrupted (broken) by the irreducible modes that we are trying to fixate. Therefore, the breaking cannot be adduced as a reason for the extratemporality of time’s root—it is an occurrence in time. The prism is a metaphor meant to indicate the contrast between the continuous unity of the ego and the diversity found in its theoretical *epochè*.

If we distinguish between, on the one hand, the coherence of before-and-after and, on the other hand, the coherence between the modes, then only the former can be said to be continuous. Even though this intermodal *systatic* coherence continues without interruption throughout time's duration, and even though an explicit intentional discontinuity between the modes is only brought about by theoretical abstraction, it cannot be said to be continuous as such. That the modes appear as discontinuous in abstraction has its ground in their ontic mutual irreducibility. Since there is no continuity whatsoever between irreducibles, the *systasis* involves the modes as "breaking points." This explains why Dooyeweerd can write that "the modal law-spheres, irreducible among themselves, are nevertheless kept in a continuous coherence of meaning by cosmic time" (Dooyeweerd 1953–1958, 2:4). There is a continuous discontinuity, so to speak.

This leaves us with the problem of Dooyeweerd's language. What does it mean that time cannot "contain" the religious fullness of meaning? And is it true? If it is true, we have a serious problem, for the fullness of God is said to have dwelt bodily in Christ. It may take a whole article by itself to deal with everything involved at this point. Here I have to limit myself to a few cursory remarks. First of all, time cannot contain anything. And second, everything depends on the meaning of *meaning* and of its *fullness*. Here, the bodily dwelling of the fullness of God in Christ is decisive. This fullness was in the man who was tired, hungry, and thirsty, who had a loaded encounter with a woman at a well, who wept, who fought the devil, and who died.

Meaning is *religious* meaning. The entire cosmic reality, ourselves included, raises the religious quest for meaning fulfillment. This no doubt stems from our radical nature as personal foci of religious passion (Dooyeweerd 1940, 182). The totality implied in this religious existence cannot be given in durational coherence or in modal diversity, because the "subjective totality" (1953–1958, 1:5) is presupposed by duration and by the modes it involves.

So, what *is* the supratemporality of the ego? It is three things.

1. We remain self-identical over the course of our life.

2. Our selfhood is not to be found in the intermodal coherence. Our self is presupposed by the *systasis* of the modes.
3. The supratemporality of the ego makes for the religious nature of the short-lived and religiously passionate human existence.

Does this religious nature imply that we have to transcend time in order to be directed to God? The answer is no. We do not have to transcend time to be directed to God, for in our very being we are already directed to God. In our selfhood, says Dooyeweerd (1939, 204), we are full concrete unities of self-awareness and awareness of God. Eternity has been set in our hearts (Eccles. 3:11), and “it is impossible for human experience to be detached from the *religious attitude* of the I-ness” (1953–1958, 2:552).

This can be paraphrased as follows. The very being of our selfhood is meaning. In experiencing and being ourselves, we have an awareness of God. In fact, we *are* awareness of God. That is to say, “in our bones” (cf. Ps. 51), in our “heart,” we experience the relativity of our meaning. That is why and how creation is radical (Dooyeweerd 1972, 188).

But then, does this not mean that in this awareness, the selfhood is extratemporal? No, it does not. There is no awareness apart from duration, and there is no human duration apart from awareness of God. The religious root of human existence is the horizon of *all* cosmic experience (Dooyeweerd 1953–1958, 2:552).

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