

The double riddle and radical religious meaning

Chris Van Haeften

Personal identity and supra-temporality

According to Dooyeweerd, “Our intuition of time is undeniably rooted in the identity of our selfhood” (1936, 69). “It is I who remain the [...] deeper unity [...] of my temporal existence” (1953-1958, 1:5). I am identical over the course of my life-time. *Se ivH2021pse* implies *se idem*.

What is this identity of the individual selfhood? Is it an objective reality? Can we form a concept of it? How is the individual selfhood experienced? How does it exist?

The answer to these questions is that selfhood, *ipseity*, is an experience. But it is not an object. Yet, it is only real in being experienced. It is *radical* reality. As such it is a basic riddle (Dooyeweerd 1960, 181). It is “subjective totality” of meaning (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:5).

As radical subjectivity of meaning self-experience points to the Absolute Origin of meaning. This pointing has appeared to be wrought with mysteries, especially because Dooyeweerd regarded the human ego as supra-temporal. What did he mean?

Many have taken supra-temporality as a left-over from scholasticism. Supra-temporality has been regarded as implying a dualism in Dooyeweerd’s theory of reality or at least as an ambiguity. For many reformational thinkers supra-temporality was reminiscent of the timeless eternity of Greek philosophy and of scholasticism.

To be sure, the term “supra-temporality” is dubious. Dooyeweerd himself came to regret that he had ever used it. It had caused a lot of confusion. Does the supra-temporality of the ego mean that the self, the “soul,” is somehow eternal? Dooyeweerd’s answer was unambiguously negative. Does the supra-temporality of the ego mean that a human being in directing personal life toward God “goes above” time? If we take into account that this “directing” is a human act, the answer to this question must be negative as well. For an act which goes beyond time, is not an act anymore. Acts are durational, they “take” time, so they cannot go beyond it.

Nor can it mean that we become conscious of some “object” beyond time. For neither the objects of primary experience nor the “objects” of theoretical thought are apart from time. Objects in the proper sense are only given in a duration of subject-object relation,

and the “objects” of theory become only known in a real act of thought. The only possibility is that in transcending theory the philosophers become aware of their radical position “in” time. The act of transcending theory is simply concerned with the ego as ego. It is meant to point the philosophers to their concrete self.

It should be emphasized that *ipseity* belongs to concrete primary experience, and that it reveals our relatedness to God. The self is not a theoretical construct of Greek origin. *Ipseity* is irreducibly *given*, and it is given *as pointing to God*. Every concrete ego *in its self-experience* is awareness of God. *Ipseity* is the experience of every concrete self, and it implies its quest for meaning. Every human being is a concrete unity of self-awareness and awareness of God, says Dooyeweerd (1939, 204). In experiencing ourselves we experience that we are meaning. That is to say, as subjective totality of meaning we are aware of our origin of meaning. Humans, in being a self, experience that they have no basis in themselves: they are not self-evident.

Person and time

Personal identity is experienced as involving a subjective lapse of time. This is why and how time is experienced. We are aware of time in being ourselves. Ego presupposes time.

Apparently, our primary intuition, upon theoretical inspection, refers us to two enigma’s at once: time and the human self. Augustine raised the question “What is time?” He knew it intimately, but could not formulate a concept of it. It is the same with regard to *ipseity*: “What am I?”

We all know ourselves. This shows in the innumerable day-time occasions when we use the personal pronoun “I,” and sometimes *ipseity* appears even during the night, in our dreams. Self-awareness is a most intimate knowledge. Yet, the question “What is this I?” constitutes the riddle of the sphinx.

The answer Dooyeweerd gives to this theoretical problem is very clear. Human existence can only be understood philosophically as real in relation to the Creator.

This is not meant to yet again open up some possibility of conceptual or quasi-conceptual knowledge. “Creator” is another term for “Absolute Origin,” which can only be known passionately, in the “heart” (Dooyeweerd 1940, 182), not by a conceptualizing theoretical mind. Jesus referred to this Reality as “Father,” Whom we are to love passionately, with all our heart, and soul and mind, and with all our

life's energy. Since the Biblical expression "heart" refers to the human being as a "personal focus" of religious passion, and since the ego *is* the heart (Dooyeweerd 1961, 44) it follows that the ego has to be become inflamed by love (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 2:49).

The designation "Absolute Origin" is philosophically quite meaningful. Its meaning is closely related to the radical cosmic status of the human self. It points to the createdness of humans. Creation, says Dooyeweerd, is radical (1960, 189-190). Therefore it is personal: *I* exist createdly. In no way can I comprehend my own being. All my comprehending, all my knowing, and all my conceptualizing presuppose me. This constitutes my supra-temporality: my functioning presupposes me, and my being presupposes time. Without my ego there is no temporal functioning. Just as ego presupposes time, time presupposes ego.

As irreducibly given to myself in *ipseity*, which is no doubt the way I was created, I appear to be passionately concerned about my existence. This ultimate concern constitutes the innate impulse to search for the Origin of my meaning (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:57). *Iipseity*, then, is not only a riddle, it also constitutes a religious-existential norm.

Time and self are equally enigmatic. Together they constitute a double riddle. They form a bi-unity. The self presupposes time, and time presupposes the self. There is no experience of time apart from a self, and there is no self-experience apart from time.

The human being is a self in cosmic coherence. For this reason Dooyeweerd referred to it as cosmic I-ness (Verburg 1989, 36). The human being is continuously taken up in the actual weaving into cosmic totality. For example, in seeing a bird's nest. That seeing takes place in actual time (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 3:109). It is an instance of the cosmos actually and coherently being woven into a totality.

The modal structure of cosmic time has to be retraced to a creaturely central root-unity of the entire temporal reality (Dooyeweerd 1942, 49-50). "The coherence of all the modal aspects of our cosmos ... *points beyond* its own limits toward a central totality," the concrete individual ego (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:4).

Cosmic reality, including the self, is experienced as dynamic and coherent, even though these qualifications only appear in philosophical analysis. Philosophy is to answer the question how everything actually and coherently weaves itself into the whole. The cosmic totality is not apart from the subjective totality (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:4-5). This subjective totality is actually operating in *all*

the functions in which it expresses itself within the coherence of our temporal world (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:5). In these lines, already to be found in *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (Dooyeweerd 1935-1936, 1:6-7), Dooyeweerd expresses what he later explicitly adds in his *New Critique*, namely, that it is cosmic time which constitutes the basis of his theory of reality (1953-1958, 1:28) and that “man [...] exists in a status of *being-universally-bound-to-time*” (1953-1958 1:24).

The cosmic weaving into totality takes place along the lines of cosmic time. It occurs continuously and according to the order of time's modes and types. This implies that the cosmic totality continuously changes. There is never a finished cosmos. As long as humans belong to cosmic reality it cannot be non-temporal. Reality can never be closed off in time. Supra-temporality must have a temporal meaning. This excludes the danger of a dichotomy.

Radical religion, radical meaning.

The question has been raised: Was Dooyeweerd under the spell of scholastic remnants in his scheme of thought? Did he write about “the center” as if its discovery presupposes theoretical reflection? Does his transcendental critique presuppose the religious-theoretical distancing found in the Greek traditions of thought?

Let it be granted that there is a remarkable similarity between Dooyeweerd and certain scholastic writers in the sense that their scheme of thought is formed by the hierarchical triplet diversity-coherence-unity. This, however, is far from sufficient to conclude that Dooyeweerd was under the spell of scholasticism. There may be some traces of it in his language, but it is wide off the mark to emphasize these, for it is totally impossible that in the traditional triplet time was basic as it was in Dooyeweerd. The dynamics of time did not become a major determining factor in philosophical thought until the end of the nineteenth century.

It may be perhaps that this new trend had not yet completely reached Dooyeweerd when he set out on his philosophical career. (Husserl's most recent lecture by then on the phenomenology of inner time-consciousness dates from 1917). However, already long before (in 1931) time became the supra-modal order of coherence Dooyeweerd was on the track of “absolute time” and “absolute movement” (Dooyeweerd 1926, 58), and already at the age of seventeen he viewed the human world as *continuously in motion* (Verburg 1989, 19, my emphasis). Ever since 1926 he showed an increasing attention for the dynamics of cosmic reality, until finally

cosmic time appears as the basis of his theory of reality. But it may not be impossible that the transition from time as a modal category (Dooyeweerd 1926, 58) to time as supra-modal order has left its traces.

In spite of these, the scheme of diversity, coherence, unity in Dooyeweerd's transcendental reflection does not allow of a hierarchical interpretation. Temporality does not come in levels. Therefore, cosmic reality, as founded in time, does not allow of a hierarchy.

But perhaps our *knowledge* of time comes in levels? Does Dooyeweerd not portray religious knowledge as a supra-theoretical and supra-temporal survey? Does he not portray reality as a static hierarchy for a surveying religious observer?

No, he does not. The transcendental critique has to be understood the other way around. Religious knowledge is only discussed towards its end, but from the outset it was directed at the self in its primary religious awareness as temporal root of cosmic reality. The philosophers are brought right back to their concrete selves. We *return* to the self (Dooyeweerd 1953-1958, 1:7, my emphasis). Then it appears that theoretical philosophy has no foundation in itself, but that it is dependent on actual concrete time and on the actual concrete ego, which *as such*, in its primary experience, is religiously in search of the fulfillment of its relativity of meaning.

According to Dooyeweerd, philosophy is *inherently* religious. It is not self-sufficient *in its own sphere*. It is not dependent on another sphere. Nor is it structurally dependent on veritable religion.

The transcendental ideas at the base of every philosophy concern the root *qua* root: the continuity of *its* time, the *root* of time's coherence, the origin of *root*. That these ideas are "religious" means that they concern the status and the nature of the self *qua* self. The root of cosmic reality, as such, *is* religious. It is a personal focus of religious passion. The transcendental basic ideas derive all their meaning from the status of cosmic mankind and the individual human being. It follows that all our knowledge is conditioned by the law for the cosmic root in relation to what it knows. In that sense human knowledge is *radically subjective*. It is this radical subjectivity which determines human beings and human knowledge as "religious." Religious self-knowledge does not transcend primary experience. We *are* concrete unities of self-awareness and awareness of God.

Without due recognition of the radical status of the human ego not only the basic denominator for the comparison of the modes of meaning will disappear from sight, but the very idea of meaning as such will disappear as well. The idea of meaning and its dynamics depends on recognition of the *absoluteness* of the root's Origin. Directedness towards God, therefore, implies a dynamic openness that can never be closed. It is the confirmation and the fulfillment of the relativity of our meaning, as we are being taught in following the New Radical Master.

References

- Dooyeweerd, H. (1926). Calvinisme contra Neo-Kantianisme. *Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte* 20, pp. 29-74.
- Dooyeweerd, H. (1935-1936). *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (3 vols). Amsterdam: H.J. Paris.
- Dooyeweerd, H. (1940). Het tijdsprobleem in de wijsbegeerte der wetsidee. *Philosophia Reformata* 5 (1-4), pp. 160-182, 193-234.
- Dooyeweerd, H. (1953-1958). *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. (4 vols). Translated by D.H. Freeman and W.S. Young. Amsterdam: H.J. Paris; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed.
- Dooyeweerd, Herman. (1960). *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*. Nutley: Craig Press.
- Dooyeweerd, Herman. (1961). De taak ener wijsgerige anthropologie en de doodlopende wegen tot wijsgerige zelfkennis. *Philosophia Reformata* 26 (1-3), pp. 35-58.
- Verburg, Marcel E. (1989). *Herman Dooyeweerd. Leven en werk van een Nederlands christen-wijsgeer*. Baarn: Ten Have.