

Dooyeweerd's theory of time, root, and supra-temporality

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1. Time, general and cosmic

With regard to time we have to distinguish between time in general and cosmic time. It is on the basis of this distinction that Dooyeweerd's philosophical theory of reality may be called new (NC1, 28). Time in general is the order of succession or simultaneity. Cosmic time is time in human experience. It is characterized by modal aspects and thing-structures. Before this cosmic order came into existence there has been a pre-cosmic time, during which the present structures were realized (Dooyeweerd 1959, 115). If not indicated otherwise, time in Dooyeweerd means cosmic time (NC1, 33).

A duration is a lapse of time. It is always preceded by the duration directly before it, and succeeded by the one immediately after it. For example the year 1954 came after the year 1953, and is followed by the year 1955. The second measure in a piece of music comes after the first, and is followed by the third. This is succession "between" durations.

There is also succession "in" durations. While the year 1954 lasts, its days successively pass. While a minute passes, its seconds tick away one after the other. And a second of time is itself a duration during which moment after moment passes away.

Like the succession between durations, the succession within them is immediate. The moments of time are not separated from each other. Time does not take a break. Therefore it is continuous duration.

Simultaneity is the occurrence of two events at the same time. For example, as when I hit a key on my keyboard and the corresponding letter appears on my screen, or as when I see two lightnings at the same time. Or while I am preparing my dinner, a car passes through my street.

There is also simultaneity between things. For example, the Castle on its rock in Edinburgh is simultaneous with part of the duration of that rock. And there is simultaneity between events and things. A military tattoo within the walls of the Castle is simultaneous with part of the duration of the Castle.

Every moment in a particular duration is simultaneous with a host of other moments, each in a different particular duration. For example, at a certain moment during my sleep someone in Melbourne

presses his mail-button “send,” while someone in New York presses his mail-button “collect,” and someone in Nevada drops something. Also, each duration as a whole may be simultaneous with another whole duration, although this will presumably rarely be observed.

The concept of simultaneity presupposes succession: The simultaneity of two durations or two moments A and B means that they are not in succession with respect to each other.

Duration in general is to be distinguished from particular durations. Duration in general is what characterizes time as time. It is its proper criterion (TLH, 71). It implies succession of moments. All particular durations share in this generality.

Some reformational thinkers were of the opinion that time is not characterized by duration. According to them, time is characterized by change. This is a misconception, for there is no change apart from a process with a certain duration. Even identity presupposes duration: When the clock stops and starts ticking again, the question “How long did the identical position of its hands last?” makes perfect sense. Duration in general is a datum of primary experience. Theoretical attempts to reduce time to something else are circular: they all presuppose duration.

Summarizing, there is succession both “in” and “between” durations. Succession is more basic than simultaneity. Duration in general is what characterizes time as time. Realities that are with respect to each other ordered in succession or simultaneity, can be said to show forth the order of time.

2. Order of individuals

There is only one kind of reality for which this either/or of succession and simultaneity holds: the individual things or events in their duration. It does not pertain to the modes of our experience, since there is never real succession between them (NC3, 79). Only individuals are temporal, in the sense that they pass. So, time is an ordering of individuals. It is the order that shows the durational and passing nature of reality.

There are other ways in which cosmic reality is ordered. Dooyeweerd provisionally found fourteen modalities and he allowed room for an incalculable diversity of thing-structures. But the interesting thing is that he regarded all of them as structures of

cosmic time. In section 7 we shall investigate whether we can find an understandable reason for this opinion.

At this point, let it suffice to say that Dooyeweerd felt impelled to state explicitly that the proper criterion for time is duration (TLH, 71). Apparently, his theory had been interpreted as identifying time with its modal structures. But time, even as characterized by the fourteen modes, is always duration. It is the order of the succession of durations. The characterization of durations by the fourteen modes makes time cosmic.

3 Personal identity and cosmic time

How do we know of time? How do we experience it? According to Dooyeweerd, our primary experience of time is rooted in our personal identity. “Our intuition of time is undeniably rooted in the identity of our selfhood,” he writes (TLH, 5), and: “I remain the central point of reference and the deeper unity of my temporal existence” (NC1, 5).

In being ourselves we find that we are temporal, and that the time of our lives goes on without interruption. The ego experiences itself as continuous. So, self-hood implies time. There is no ego-experience apart from time-experience.

The reverse only holds for cosmic time. But it is true as well: cosmic time implies the ego. There is only cosmic time on the basis of human experience. Since the arrival of humankind the coherent totality of reality includes the human being, and ever since reality can only be humanly experienced according to the structural laws holding for this coherence. For humans there is no reality but according to the structure of human experience.

This is the meaning of reality and time being cosmic. With the arrival of humankind time became cosmic, whereas before it was pre-cosmic (Dooyeweerd 1959, 115). The ongoing-ness of temporal reality came to include its ongoingness-as-for-humans.

This means that the cosmic horizon and the human horizon are identical. It cannot be otherwise, for it is excluded that we would experience anything beyond our cosmic possibilities. Therefore, cosmic time is human time, and human time is cosmic time.

This is the meaning of cosmic meaning being centered in a subjective totality, the human ego (NC1, 4-5). Reality was created in concentric relation to the root of human existence (NC2, 549). So, the human ego is not the origin of reality, but it is the root of cosmic

reality. “Ex origine” cosmic meaning converges in the human being (NC2, 30).

4. The horizon of human experience and religious knowledge

Cosmic time is the horizon of human experience. All human experience is process, and all human experience occurs according to the laws set for cosmic reality. This is the real implication of man-and-cosmos having been created. Creation means that cosmic reality and cosmic time are *given*, and that this givenness cannot be circumvented.

The cosmic horizon is universal for all cosmic reality, it can never be lifted. Even though in theoretical thought the attempt is made to abstract from the continuity of cosmic time, this attempt can never succeed. The abstraction is merely intentional. The theoretical act is a *real* act (NC1, 39). The real time of our real thought cannot be stopped.

We cannot escape from cosmic time. Its **primary givenness** implies that there is no higher standpoint for us from which we could make a judgement about it, for example, that its continuity veils its full reality. Some interpreters, however, are of the opinion that such a judgement is possible and that “religious knowledge” unveils the full reality of cosmic time. This betrays a misunderstanding of the import of primary givenness, as well as a misunderstanding of religious knowledge and of divine revelation.

That the structure of our “naïve” experience is primary means that it accords with the way we were created, and that it shows the way we exist as created beings. Any alleged possibility to transcend the structures of our createdness contradicts the real meaning of creation.

Religious knowledge is surely dependent on divine revelation. But it does not imply the possibility to lift the given structures of our created, cosmic nature. Divine revelation is directed at the human person in its life lived. It does not support a “religious” attempt to transcend createdness.

Divine revelation, in the structures of cosmic reality, in the experience of existence in self-hood, in listening to the scriptures’ Word of Life, is always addressed at the human “heart,” at the human ego in its life lived. Only for this reason Dooyeweerd called it

religious. Today we would avoid such terminology because it has too many supranatural overtones.

An attempt to rise above the createdness of cosmic time also shows a misunderstanding of the nature of meaning. Meaning and religion are two sides of the same coin, the created nature of human cosmic existence and experience. Cosmic reality “is meaning,” says Dooyeweerd. This is a curious phrase. But there is hardly a better way to express the meaning of meaning. Dooyeweerd has in mind that the primary, given nature of human life-and-cosmic reality necessarily cause the human ego to search for the Origin of its meaning. He quotes Augustine’s well-known dictum about the unrest of the human heart: “Inquietum est *cor* nostrum,” and he adds “et mundus in corde nostro” (and the world in our heart, NC1, 11). It is this “unrest” by which the reality of meaning is dynamic.

5. Reality and the root of the riddle

Reality is given in the coherence of cosmic time. Since time is always going on, reality is always going on. Always and everywhere something is going on. There is nothing static about cosmic reality.

This dynamic givenness means that for theoretical thought everything necessarily is and remains a riddle. Contrary to Wittgenstein’s expectation, there is no way out for the fly. If there were, as is the deep-felt conviction of the believers in science, the createdness of cosmic reality could be cancelled out. But there is no such supra-human possibility, not even in “supra-temporality.” I will discuss the meaning of this infelicitous phrase in section 6.

The core of the riddle is the human self. Being me in time’s ongoingness is the root for which alone this riddle can be a riddle. In the human ego all experience is concentrated, and here the quest for the Origin and the fulfillment of meaning is inevitable.

Dooyeweerd embraced Kuyper’s idea that the deepest “point” in our awareness cannot only be compared to a root from which branches stem, but also to a “brandpunt,” a focus (TLH 68). He writes this down with a certain emphasis. From the context it is clear that this “focus” is affective in nature. It turns around harmony and pain. The combination of “brand” (fire) and affect definitely points to its passionate nature. For this reason it can well be said that the “heart” (merely a naïve biblical term for the self; the ego is the heart,

Twilight 189) is a hotbed of religious passion. This accords well with what is going on in the I-Thou psalms.

6. Supra-temporality

The idea of supra-temporality has been the cause of many headaches. Many have thought that it implies a dualism in Dooyeweerd's philosophy. I think that this is mere appearance, arising from the scholastic heritage according to which eternity is qualitatively different from time. Supra-temporality therefore took on the hue of timeless eternity. But already in 1939 Dooyeweerd made it clear that this is a misunderstanding. In 1953 he added that the supra-temporal center of human existence has nothing static.

In the meantime, he gave several clues about the meaning of human supra-temporality. In the first place, the human ego does not pass with the fleeting moments of time. "I remain the central point of reference of my temporal existence," he wrote. Secondly, the human ego is presupposed as the root of all modes of cosmic time. Because of these two traits Dooyeweerd said that the human being had been created in the image of God. Not only do I remain beyond the passing of time, I am also "above" the structures of cosmic reality. But he also emphasized that the ego remains bound to those structures.

Many have doubted whether it is well-founded to interpret the *imago Dei* in this way. There appear to be good reasons for this doubt. But in connection with Dooyeweerd's meaning of supra-temporality this is immaterial. Decisive is that he regarded the "supra-temporal" core of human existence as passionate. The ego *is* the heart. A human being in self-experience, identical in its core, bound to the meaning-structures of cosmic reality, is in its very existence spurred on to direct itself passionately toward the Origin of all temporal meaning.

7. Modalities as modes of cosmic time

The idea of cosmic time was not in Dooyeweerd's mind from the beginning of his philosophical development. Way back in 1926 he still regarded time as a modal figure. Only after 1926 did cosmic time become the supra-modal bond of coherence between the diversity of modes. Originally the status of the modes was not tied to time. They were, however, understood as originating from the Creator. Since God

had for centuries been regarded as “eternal” it may well be surmised that this contributed to the conception of modalities as non-temporal.

If this surmise is warranted, it could explain two things at once. Both the recurring attempts to take time as a mode and the difficulties with regard to supra-temporality could be traced back to this same idea of eternity. Those opting for the non-temporality of the modes, might be supposed to be under the spell of “qualitatively different” eternity, while those who reject the supra-temporality of the human ego might be supposed to be influenced by the lingering of the same idea. To them supra-temporality smacks of timelessness.

Anyway, it is clear that in his mature philosophy Dooyeweerd regarded the modalities as modes of cosmic time, and the human ego as supra-temporal. By “time” Dooyeweerd always meant *cosmic* time. Thus, he regarded the human ego as not only not passing with the fleeting moments of time but also as not to be found among the structures of cosmic time.

Modalities may be cosmic, but why are they modes of time? Can they not be modes of something else? First of all, Dooyeweerd starts from the bottom-layer of our experience. This is time in its continuity. This starting-point is well-founded, for human experience is occurring experience. It is itself temporal through and through, and it is continuous. It continues even while we sleep.

Day-time experience allows of theoretical thought. Science and epistemology have made it clear that there are diverse modes of theoretical thought. So the ontological question arises what it is that is modalized according to these modes.

That they must stem from primary experience in order to be well-founded does not answer the ontological question of *what* they are modes. They may originate in our experience, but that is not enough for an answer, because undeniably many “things” originate in our experience. Illusions certainly have their origin in human awareness.

The modes of theoretical thought are expected to be true. Some of them have in fact proved to be true. Especially the modes of arithmetic, geometry, phoronomy (the science of motion), and the viewpoint of physics have yielded reliable truth. This is enough to support the idea that the modes by which the sciences are characterized are modes of experiential cosmic reality.

This then, brings us back to the question about the relation between the experiential and the cosmic horizon. According to Dooyeweerd, these horizons are identical. We found this to be

plausible (section 3), especially when we realize that human experience is itself interwoven in the coherence of the cosmic horizon. The dualism of knowledge and cosmos is untenable. Human experience occurs according to the laws set for cosmic reality since it is part of that coherence. Since cosmic reality and cosmic experience are temporal, the modes of human experience must be modes of cosmic time.

References

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