

DOOYEWEERD MADE EASY

(Well . . . easier!)

by Colin Wright

INTRODUCTION

You love him or you hate him. You read him or you burn him. But he will not go away. So maybe, I said to the editor, maybe it's time to grasp the nettle and write something about him.

But understand. This will not be an abstruse philosophical critique; merely a layman's guide. This is not an altogether wise thing to write. For one thing, Dooyeweerd is a massive Continental thinker, and his writings are both voluminous and difficult. One has to "plough" through them much as one has to "plough" through Kant or Heidegger, Barth or Drewermann. This can result in a distortion of his ideas, or even the accusation of misrepresentation, neither of which we intend. For another, the task of simplifying such a massive corpus is itself replete with difficulty.

Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons why we should essay the task: on the one hand, there have been a number of critical attacks on Dooyeweerd's philosophy by eminent Reformed and even Reconstructionist thinkers. These are men whose work and worth we otherwise regard highly, but whose published statements regarding Dooyeweerd appear to us to be distortions of his work. We cite particularly Gary North, Cornelius Van Til, John Frame and Vern Poythress. In many instances they do not even seem to retain their usual academic integrity when it comes to discussing this *bête noir* of theirs. Nevertheless, they have considerable influence and, I must confess, their criticisms often send me back to Dooyeweerd to re-examine him. It seems to me that, at the least, a *popular* exposition of the leading themes of his avowedly Christian philosophy should be put forward by his sympathisers if only to clarify matters for those who have no time or philosophical training to investigate the matter for themselves in the philosophical literature.

Secondly, we feel there is an urgent need for educated laymen to understand what a Christian philosophy entails and to re-examine their own pre-suppositions. If we take a close look at those who attain in their Christian profession to a confession of the authority of Scripture as God's Word, we are amazed at the extent to which their fundamental views are vitiated by alien, non-Christian, thought forms. They just do not have a Christian world-view or outlook. Essentially they are *baptised humanists* in their thinking, whatever their standing before God. An outline study of Dooyeweerd will hopefully demonstrate the fundamental antithesis between the Christian and the non-Christian ways of thinking and of viewing the world in which God has set us.

Thirdly, we want to demonstrate that Dooyeweerd's philosophy is not incompatible with consistent theonomic or Reconstructionist positions but in fact undergirds them.¹ To

say this is not the same as to say that Dooyeweerd was a theonomist or a Reconstructionist in the accepted American sense. There are differences of outlook and, more importantly, differences of perspective and culture.² Despite Van Til's Dutch origins and Rushdoony's Armenian origins, both men are clearly Americans and have written and thought in American terms from an American perspective. Similarly Dooyeweerd wrote and thought as a European. His problems and concerns, as we hope to demonstrate, were not their problems or concerns. Both were engaged in the same struggle, in the context of their own social, intellectual and political milieux.

Finally, before proceeding to an analysis of Dooyeweerd himself, we should make it absolutely clear that we have no interest in defending Dooyeweerd's views on *every* point. We do not intend a blanket defence of everything he said and wrote. Dooyeweerd himself was insistent that he was far from having said the last word in Christian philosophy and that it behoved the Christian world either to develop his ideas further or abandon them in favour of better, more Christian ones. Like him—and we acknowledge his profound influence upon us here—we have no wish to establish or defend a party. Christian philosophy is still very much in its early stages, and it is incumbent upon us to develop a spirit of humility and co-operation with those who do not always see eye to eye with us in the struggle. Cross-fertilisation of ideas is essential if Christian philosophy is to develop.³ It will not do to be continually anathematising one other. As Calvin Seerveld so tellingly put it, in his essay on *Dooyeweerd's Legacy for Aesthetics*, "Nobody has

1. Particularly in the sense that American Reconstructionism has largely failed to generate any coherent philosophical *system*. Rushdoony, who has written with great respect for Dooyeweerd, nevertheless chose to concentrate on promoting a theonomic undergirding of morality in opposition to a thoroughly antinomian life-style in American Christianity. Van Til, though much more philosophical in his writings, is quite unserviceable in this respect too as he wrote in a far too scattered and disorganised manner to present a coherent system. His books are rarely indexed or footnoted, and then only poorly. North's critique of him in *Dominion and Common Grace* is telling. North has the ability to develop a system himself but has chosen rather to pursue his interest in economics. No-one documents his writings better than North, or includes such comprehensive indices; though no-one complains so loudly about having to do it either.

2. One leading scholar attributes much of the difficulty of penetrating Dooyeweerd's thought in North America to "its background in the continental European milieu." See Hendrik Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 372, note 13.

3. Cf. Proverbs 27:17—Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.

a corner on infallibility."⁴ And as Dooyeweerd himself was to assert in his magnum opus: "There must be a *constant* striving after the reformation of philosophical thought. This precludes the canonising of a philosophical system."⁵ And this just after he had warned:

The reformation of philosophy in a Christian sense does not signify the inauguration of a new school-philosophy such as Thomism which binds itself to the authority of a philosophical system and thinker. It does not signify the elevation of Calvin to a pater angelicus of reformed philosophical thought. It does not mean that we will seek a philosophical system in Calvin that is not there. It does mean, however, that we will relate philosophical thought in its entire foundation, starting-point, and transcendental direction, to the new root of our cosmos in Christ. We will reject every philosophical standpoint that leans upon the "naturalistic ratio" as a supposed self-sufficient Archimedean point. Our aim is an inner reform of thought which is born from the living power of God's Word, and not from an abstract and static principle of reason.⁶

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES ON DOOYEWEERD'S THINKING

Dooyeweerd's philosophy did not spring full-grown from Zeus' head. He did not wake up one morning and suddenly discover it was there. It was not an Archimedean "heureka" experience. Rather was it born out of a lengthy intellectual struggle that took place within the context of a specifically *Dutch* political movement and a specifically *European* philosophical context.

Indeed, it did not really have its origins even here. Though we acknowledge Dooyeweerd's immense and brilliant contribution to the explication of a Christian philosophy, we cannot, and ought not, to conceal the valuable work of many of his predecessors. Though he developed a unique style and vocabulary of his own, he also built upon the earlier work of other (mainly European) Christians. It is well known that he regarded his agenda as a continuance of Abraham Kuyper's own reform programme, and was profoundly influenced by a reading of Kuyper's 1898 Stone Lectures⁷ in particular. One finds quite clearly too the seeds of Dooyeweerd's philosophy in the 1908 Stone Lectures of Kuyper's associate at the Free University, Herman Bavinck.⁸ Long forgotten now, but influential at the time and highly regarded by Kuyper, was the Scots Presbyterian James Orr whose work *The Christian View of God and the World* anticipated Kuyper's Stone Lectures in its development of the idea of a specifically Christian *weltanschauung* or world-view.⁹

4. Art. "Dooyeweerd's Legacy for Aesthetics" in C. T. McIntire (ed.), *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd* (NY: University Press of America, 1985), p. 59.

5. Herman Dooyeweerd, *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub Co., 1953), Vol. I, p. 522.

6. *New Critique*, Vol. I, p. 522.

7. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, being the L. P. Stone Lectures at Princeton University for 1898. Published currently by Eerdmans in book form and also available on the Internet at the Kuyper Foundation's web site.

8. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, being the Stone Lectures for 1908-9. Published in recent times by Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, 1979) and also available on the Internet at the Kuyper Foundation's web site: <http://www.kuyper.org>.

9. James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 3rd ed., 1897). Orr was Professor of Church History at the United Presbyterian College, Edinburgh, and wrote a number of useful but unhappily forgotten tomes, including *The Progress of Dogma*, *The Resurrection of Jesus and Neglected Factors in the Study of the Early Progress of Christianity*. The Kuyper Foundation plans to publish the *Christian View* at least on its web site in 1999.

It will be necessary, therefore, to say something first about Dooyeweerd's early life and the intellectual climate in which he grew up. We will then trace the outline of his struggle to develop a specifically Christian view of things, particularly the relationship between *legality* and *morality*.

Herman Dooyeweerd was born in Amsterdam in 1894, the son of his father's second marriage, and into the care of a Christian home. Father and mother were supporters of the Kuyperian neo-Calvinistic reform movement and church, and young Herman was sent to be educated at one of their pioneering schools. His secondary school headmaster was one Dr J. Woltjer, a fellow labourer of Kuyper's and part-time professor of Philology at the Free University that Kuyper had founded in 1884. Thus even at a tender age he came under the influence of a robust and self-conscious Calvinistic world-view both at home and in school.

It was only natural that at the end of his school years in 1912 he should choose, as a committed Christian of his parents' persuasion, to proceed to enrolment at the Free University of Amsterdam, the neo-Calvinists' flagship. Though he had originally considered studying literature or music, his final choice lay with law. This, he felt, would open up a wide choice of career opportunities after graduation.

At university he came under the influence of three stalwart defenders and pioneers of Christian legal theory: Prof. A. Anema, Prof. D. P. D. Fabius, and Prof. P. A. Diepenhorst. We would recommend the reader to peruse Henderson's comprehensive analysis of their place in Dooyeweerd's development in his excellent study, *Illuminating Law*.¹⁰ Although he was to express dismay at the limited degree to which they had carried out the neo-Calvinist programme of reform in legal theory, the criticism was aimed at the sorry state of intellectual advance rather than the abilities or commitment of its proponents. In after years he always spoke highly of his teachers and the influence they had had upon him. He was determined however to play his part in taking things much further. These criticisms too were made by a young man who had gone up to university with fire in his belly, expecting as he said that "here at this University I would learn what the consequences of the Kuyperian life view were which he [Kuyper] called Calvinistic; and which had had great influence on me."¹¹ The young aspiring student had grander expectations of the new movement than were realistically possible. At the time he was unaware just how significant a contribution he would later make as he headed towards a career in the legal profession or the civil service.

In 1917 Dooyeweerd submitted his Ph.D. thesis on *The Cabinet in Dutch Constitutional Law*. Of particular concern to him even at this stage of his development was the question of legitimacy. He wanted to ask what norms governed the way it could and could not act. What was the nature of these norms? What was their origin; that is, from where did they derive their authority?

This subject he found important not merely as a matter of academic interest but because he wanted to discover how Christianity was related to the world as it is, in its societal, political and legal structures. He wanted a basis for determin-

10. R. D. Henderson, *Illuminating Law: The Construction of Herman Dooyeweerd's Philosophy 1918-1928*. This appears to be a private publication from 1994 out of either San Francisco or Amsterdam. It is poorly produced but the content more than makes up for it. It is based on Henderson's doctoral dissertation at the Free University under Prof. H. G. Geertsma, Prof. N. P. Wolterstorff and Prof. A. M. Wolters. For those in the UK, I obtained my copy through The Christian Studies Unit, 65 Prior Park Road, Bath, BA2 4NL.

11. Translated by R. D. Henderson in *Illuminating Law*, p. 17f., and found in C. Veenhof, *In de lijn van Kuyper* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1939).

ing the limits and extent of government action and, no less important, a method of determining the validity of laws and thus of their just or unjust claims on the obedience of the subjects. We cannot emphasise strongly enough that for Dooyeweerd these matters were not merely “theoretical” but burning issues for everyday life in the Netherlands. Indeed within a few years he was having to put them to the test as he battled in the Dutch Resistance against the *de facto*—and, it seems, for many Christians the *de jure*—Nazi government.¹² Here are the germs of his later researches. Here already he has set himself his target, when he insists on the need for a “philosophical legal foundation of jurisprudence.”¹³

In the next few years Dooyeweerd took a number of jobs in rather quick succession. For a year he worked in a small seaport as a government tax official. In 1918 he acted as legal advisor to the municipality of Leyden. The following year he moved to The Hague to a new post in the Department of Labour, with responsibility for drafting and advising on legislative proposals. During this time he spent all his spare time in continued study of the subject that absorbed him: philosophy of law. Of particular importance to him was a deep study of the men “making waves” at that time: the neo-Kantians such as Hans Kelsen, Krabbe, Rudolf Stammler, Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Cassirer and Edmund Husserl.

Also at this time he was to team up with the man who was to become a life-long friend and fellow-worker towards a Christian philosophy, Dirk Vollenhoven. In fact, in 1918 Vollenhoven married Dooyeweerd’s sister. The two men had been students together at school and university. Now they were to begin a programme of research together to develop a neo-Calvinist philosophical foundation for the sciences.

Dooyeweerd took a major step in October 1922 when he accepted the post of Director at the Abraham Kuyper Institute in The Hague. The Institute had been set up by the neo-Calvinist Anti-Revolutionary Party (founded by Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper) as a policy research facility. In the next four years he was to flesh out the “rudimental conception,” as he later called it,¹⁴ that he had already discovered in his early researches with Vollenhoven. Early in his tenure of the directorship at the Kuyper Institute a significant event was to influence the future course of his thinking; he rediscovered Kuyper. Strangely, he had not read Kuyper as a student and had paid him scant attention since. The story goes that he picked up a copy of the Stone Lectures one afternoon while seated at his desk and, like a true scholar, became so engrossed that he forgot the time. He arrived home late in the evening to find his supper cold and his landlady none too happy. From that point on, Kuyper was to figure large in the development of his philosophy.

The goal did not change at the Institute. Dooyeweerd was still driven by two things: the need to clearly demarcate morality and legality and the need to find the true source or ground of legal norms. He quickly found himself dragged into a wider study of the need for demarcating all the sciences. The struggle was seemingly not so much one of discovery as one of articulation. From the beginning Dooyeweerd saw clearly that the issue rested for the Christian on the sovereignty of God over his creation. The biblical doctrine of creation out of nothing

implied that all that happens does so as the outcome of God’s world plan. All things are structured according to his creative purposes. In one of his earliest publications, *Calvinism and Natural Law* (1925), he remarked:

God in his inscrutable providential cosmic plan has ordered everything according to fixed rules; he has put his holy ordinance over everything; which, being dependent only on God’s will, is not binding on God but only on the creature. No creature, nothing in heaven or on earth, can call him to account for his deeds, but everything outside of him is bound to his law.¹⁵

A little later he adds: “The content of this law-idea is that of divine ordering, the ordaining of all that is created according to the unity of an *einheitlich* (unitary) and providential cosmic plan—a unity which is unknowable to our reason.”¹⁶

The last assertion in this statement, that ultimately the human mind cannot grasp the full picture of the universe not merely because of its size but, more fundamentally, because it is impossible to reduce it to a set of logical propositions, is profoundly important. For while it allows that the world is understandable, it denies that it can be reduced to human comprehension. It is certainly at odds with the humanist approach as encapsulated in Otto Neurath’s declaration: “The scientific world-conception knows *no unsolvable riddle*.”¹⁷ Of course, the humanist needs this ability to grasp the world exhaustively, not in its detailed facts so much as in its structure. Without understanding of the basic structure of the universe—which the humanist finds in human logic and Dooyeweerd in God’s plan—there is no way of building a human system of knowledge that has any relevance or meaning.

Dooyeweerd is saying then that three issues are fundamental to a Christian philosophy. The first is that the whole creation is structured by God in his own way. Law, then, is *heteronomous*. That is, it comes from outside the system and is imposed upon it. In particular, and in opposition to the thought of his day, he saw that the norms of societal structures—family, church, state, business—are not merely the product of human invention or even of evolution. Man cannot change them. He must discover what they are by a study of Scripture and of the world in the light of Scripture.

Secondly, the nature of this structure is ultimately beyond man’s ability to grasp.

Thirdly, in his criticism of the neo-Kantians he often spoke of their “denaturing” of legality. By this he meant that in their efforts to reduce it to morality, or an aspect of morality, they were in effect denying the inherently juridical or legal nature of legality. This may seem a trivial issue. It is extremely important for politics however. If legal rules (state laws) are just morality, if the two can be equated, then must not the state enforce *all* moral norms? Surely they must be if the reason for enforcing them is that they are moral requirements. In effect, this has happened. Political correctness is the attempt to enforce every

15. Art. “Calvinism and Natural Law,” in Herman Dooyeweerd, *Essays in Legal, Social, and Political Philosophy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996), p. 16. This is Volume 2 (Series B) of the *Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd*. Although this is a very early work of Dooyeweerd, and he later modified some of his positions, it remains an essay well worth a deep study.

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

17. Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Reidel Publishing Co., 1973), p. 306. I first came across this when it was propounded in a sympathetic university lecture. The lecturer was none too pleased when I asked: How did Neurath know that? Does such a statement not require omniscience? Is it not a statement of faith?

18. Of course, the morality they wish to enforce is not *Christian* morality. Many PC norms are not even *moral* requirements in

12. Passive submission to government law whatever its nature is a matter we have had to discuss before. See our review of David W. Hall, *Savior or Servant?* in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Jan. 1997 and the resulting correspondence in the following two issues.

13. *The Cabinet in Dutch Constitutional Law*, p. 30. Translated and quoted by Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

14. In Foreword to *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (1935), the first Dutch edition of the later *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (1953), p. v.

moral norm by the power of the sword.¹⁸ Furthermore, a problem arises with the definition itself. If we are bound to obey the law, what is the nature of the command "Obey the law"? Is it a moral requirement? If its enforcement is to be that of any other moral norm then ultimately a law is to be obeyed simply because the state says so. This is totalitarianism, not Christian politics. As Dooyeweerd would later show in the brilliant analysis of his *General Theory of the Modal Spheres*, the fact that there is an unbreakable intertwining of morality and legality in any real historical fact or event does not detract from the fact that they are two quite distinct ideas.

We shall now look at some of the distinctive features of Dooyeweerd's mature philosophy.

THE GENERAL THEORY OF THE MODAL SPHERES

Once Dooyeweerd had established his ideas clearly about the irreducibility to each other of morality and legality, he was well on the way to developing a more general theory of all the irreducible ideas within creation. These he referred to indifferently as *modal spheres* or *aspects of meaning*,¹⁹ and the investigation and classification of them as *The General Theory of the Modal Spheres*.²⁰

This too was far from being a mere academic exercise. In his contests with the neo-Kantians it became clear that "denaturing" of scientific data was a major issue. For they wished to go much further than reduction of legality to morality. In the more general scientific schemas, they attempted to reduce all facts to natural scientific ones, and to apply the natural scientific method across the board, even to sociology, jurisprudence and theology. By this standard, what could not be explained scientifically—that is, according to the methodology of the mathematical sciences—was unexplainable, and thus not knowledge at all.

Furthermore, he noticed that wherever this method was practised confusion abounded and unsolvable riddles appeared. To give a simple example: When the atheist Bertrand Russell attempted to reduce all mathematics to logic even he recognised that he could no longer say $1 + 1 = 2$. Logically, he had to say $1 + 1 = 1$.²¹ Dooyeweerd recognised that the idea of quantity, or how-muchness, could not be reduced to logic.

Similarly, when the literature sought to reduce the moral and legal norms, among others, to the evolutionary development of mankind, and explainable purely in terms of historical circumstances, Dooyeweerd recognised that neither morality nor legality could be understood simply in terms of the historical power to impose them. If this were the case, there would be

Christian thinking (e.g. anti-smoking, teetotalism) whereas many Christian norms (e.g. anti-abortion, anti-fornication) are not considered either moral or legal norms by PC thinking.

19. Confusingly, they were given other names also, including *meaning-moments*, *law spheres* and *temporal meaning modalities*.

20. The Theory of the Modal Spheres is fully discussed by Dooyeweerd in the second volume of his magnum opus, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*.

21. We will not attempt to explain this as it would go too far beyond our purpose in this essay. It is not a difficult concept however: even the humble personal computer knows the difference, and the programmer has to instruct it quite clearly whether he wants it to add two numbers *numerically* or *logically*. The argument is fully discussed in the literature for those who are interested in pursuing it. See, e.g. Dooyeweerd's own criticism of Russell in *New Critique*, Vol. II, p. 83, and the neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer's critique in *Substance and Function* (New York: Dover Publications, 1953), Chapter 2, "The Concept of Number," and esp. pp. 52-54.

22. See especially his *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

no justification for enforcing them other than the desire to do so. It would be merely a matter of the legislator's preference for time-honoured traditional practices over the wishes of the populace. There could be no genuine *ought* as a side, or aspect, of human life and experience. To make morality a matter of historical power is to deny its real existence as morality. Historicism, the idea that human ways of thinking and behaving are merely the result of historical conditioning, is a powerful force in our culture. Even unbelievers see the serious problems it leads to and no less an authority than Sir Karl Popper wrote against it fiercely²² for most of his career, though with little to replace it. It destroys all absolute standards and makes them the whim of the moment. This relativism is seen no more clearly than in the statement of Thomas Altizer:

The era of Christian civilisation has come to an end, with the result that all cognitive meaning and all moral values that were once historically associated with the Christian God have collapsed . . . This meaning of "historical" is intimately related to the modern idea of "historicity": for, in this perspective, "historicity" means a total immersion in historical time, an immersion that is totally isolated from any meaning or reality that might lie beyond it.²³

And perhaps it is seen supremely in the assertion of the Unitarian minister Octavius Frothingham that, "The life of the time appoints the creed of the time and modifies the establishment of the time."²⁴

Clearly, there are distinct ideas such as morality, legality, historical power, logic, how-muchness (quantity, number) that are not explainable in terms of other things. They are *irreducible* aspects of human experience. Any attempt to explain any one of them in terms of any other irreducible aspect merely raises unresolvable problems or riddles, what Dooyeweerd referred to as *antinomies*.

By the time he had finished investigating this fascinating fact about our thinking he had accounted for fifteen such aspects. They are the numerical, the spatial, movement, physical energy, organic life, feeling, logic, historical power, linguistic symbolism, social intercourse, economic, aesthetic, jural (legal), moral and faith aspects.

Dooyeweerd is here handling the same problem that Rushdoony, Van Til and others envision from another perspective: the problem of the One and the Many. But whereas they seem satisfied to simply relate this idea of the equal ultimacy of unity and plurality to the similar ultimacy in the Trinity and to return to their major interests of theonomy and apologetics respectively, he attempts to develop a full-blown theoretical system out of it. For Dooyeweerd, simply asserting that the universe is multi-form and irreducible to one idea is not enough. He feels the need to investigate the nature of the diversity and of the unity and, insofar as man is capable of grasping it, to conceptualise it in theoretical and systematic statements. He feels this need because, as he often points out, it is unclear thinking on the nature of this diversity that leads us into errors that have profound consequences for individuals and society.

23. Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Mircea Eliade and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1963), p. 13. Quoted in Rushdoony, *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), p. 2. The problem with such a postulate is that, if it were true, there is no way man could know it, and certainly not as a timeless and absolute fact. It is self-refuting.

24. Octavius B. Frothingham, *The Religion of Humanity* (New York: Putnam, 1875), p. 7f. Quoted in Rushdoony, *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), p. 9.

THE THEORY OF THE STRUCTURES OF INDIVIDUALITY

In the General Theory of the Modal Spheres Dooyeweerd investigated the way in which a thing behaves or *functions*. In his *Theory of the Structures of Individuality* he sought to discover the way in which it is or *exists*, that is, what precisely determines its individuality. What constitutes its uniqueness as a *thing* in its own right rather than as an unrecognisable part of a huge amorphous blob? How do we distinguish between one thing and another? How can we distinguish between the tree in our garden from the ground in which it is embedded or the fence with which it is surrounded? Are these distinctions we make between separate things really there in creation, or are they merely constructions of the human mind, illusions of our brains? For every day life these are not serious issues, but for philosophy they are core problems.

Further, Dooyeweerd wanted to ask, Exactly what constitutes an individual whole? He used the now famous example of the linden tree²⁵ outside his study window. With time and the seasons it changed considerably. What then guarantees that it remains the *same* tree, and what constitutes this tree thing amidst all the changes that occur within it? Again, he referred to a book on his desk. Over the years it became increasingly tattered and had lost some of its pages. Nevertheless it remained quite visibly the same book. But if it was thrown on a fire, though the materials from which it was made would continue to exist, yet the book would be totally lost. It would have ceased to exist. Wherein, then, lies the quality that makes for *bookness*, and what is it that the fire destroys? This was not a new problem. It had been amply discussed as far back as Plato and beyond. Indeed, it was one of the original problems of presocratic Greek philosophy. Dooyeweerd sought to give an answer that was founded upon the Christian idea of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by a transcendent God.

His theory begins with an analysis of the structure of inanimate and animate *things*. But equally if not more interesting is his penetrating analysis of the structures of society, namely church, state and family. Whilst doing full justice to the human involvement in these institutions, he is at pains to show that they are not mere human inventions but creational structures that cannot be avoided by man; structures he discovers, not structures he creates. Each has its own God-given structure, its own "sovereign" place in the sun. He found this principle clearly enunciated in Scripture, for him the foundation of all our understanding of nature and society. But clearly his reading of Kuyper had affected him profoundly in this area, as he was the first to admit. Kuyper in his own day had had to battle for the rights of the family²⁶ and church against the encroachments on their liberty by the state. Dooyeweerd in his philosophy was to put Kuyper's ideas into a systematic form. Both relied heavily on the early chapters of Genesis, particularly the idea that God created everything after its kind (Genesis 1). Dooyeweerd later recounted: "Kuyper had given his conception of sphere-sovereignty profound biblically religious anchorage in relating it to God's absolute sovereignty over everything He created *after its inner nature in subjection to His law.*"²⁷

TRANSCENDENTAL CRITIQUE OF THEORETICAL THOUGHT

Dooyeweerd's technique of Transcendental Criticism is perhaps the most vociferously attacked aspect of his thought. This is mainly due to the opposition of Van Til, who regarded its introduction into the 1953 English edition of *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (i.e. the *New Critique*) as an abandonment of presuppositionalism in favour of a neutrality postulate in disguise. I am aware of a number of people who hawk Van Til's argument but who have not read Dooyeweerd's own statements. Dooyeweerd always categorically denied that transcendental criticism meant any such thing and, indeed, was at pains to point out that Van Til was arguing as a scholastic rationalist.²⁸ Certainly, there are some statements in the *New Critique* that might at first glance give one cause to ponder. But their author flatly denied at every point that they mean what his opponents take them to mean. Now one might in this case accuse him of bad grammar, of ill-thought out sentences. But to accuse him of believing and teaching what he clearly denies hardly seems a fair way of proceeding. We have to take what he says in the meaning he puts upon it unless we wish to accuse him of deliberate deceit, a course no one has yet taken.

What then did Dooyeweerd mean by it? We shall try to explain in as simple terms as possible, though no doubt his detractors will maintain that we have left out the salient features.

In 1632 Galileo published his earth-shattering *Dialogues on the Two Chief Systems of the World*. He was promptly tried and imprisoned in Italy for his daring scientific statements, which shocked the Roman Catholic hierarchy. These statements did not accord with their theology. In fact, they pretty much blew it away. It seems at first glance as if Galileo was attacking the biblical record. If so, this would have been a serious charge. But in fact what he really attacked was *their interpretation* of what Scripture said. And that interpretation was *not* what Scripture said; it was a re-interpretation of the Bible in terms of the categories of Aristotle's Greek non-Christian philosophy. They seemed wholly oblivious to this; as, almost certainly, did Galileo.²⁹

Dooyeweerd wanted to draw two lessons from this. On the one hand, he disagreed with the idea that one could critique one aspect of reality from the standpoint of another. In the case of Galileo, the authorities were criticising the functioning of the mathematical aspects of number, space and extension and energy in terms of that of faith. That is, systematic theology was being used to test the accuracy of natural scientific conclusions. Within three centuries the tables were fully turned and the conclusions of systematic theology were being tested by the latest in natural scientific theories. Dooyeweerd referred to this technique as *transcendent criticism*. It is an attempt at the end of the day to make one aspect of reality the key to all others. This does not do justice to the facts as he saw them, namely, that creation displays a wide variety of functional aspects that

28. Once Van Til had made up his mind to attack Dooyeweerd he seemed to become impervious to any argument. When Dooyeweerd flatly denied the charge of introducing "brute" facts under the guise of "states of affairs" Van Til simply ignored him and proceeded with his old criticism, *Jerusalem and Athens*, pp. 74-127. If Dooyeweerd ever read this misdirected criticism of Van Til's he must have smiled at the delicious irony of even the editor's failure to understand him when every page of his article and Van Til's reply are headed "*Transcendent (!) Critique of Theoretical Thought.*" See Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Hobbs: Trinity Foundation, 1997 [3rd ed.]) for the account of a similar heresy-hunt against Gordon Clark.

29. See, for a very readable account of the Kepler/Galileo revolution in science, Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959).

25. *New Critique*, Vol. III, p. 3.

26. Particularly the forced inoculation of children against the parents' wishes, Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 44. The application of Dooyeweerd's philosophy (and Rushdoony's Reconstructionism) to the family is brilliantly explored by Jean-Marc Berthoud, *L'École et la Famille contre l'Utopie* (Lausanne: Éditions L'Âge d'Homme, 1997). We shall review it in *Christianity & Society* early next year. An English translation is sorely needed.

27. In *Philosophia Reformata*, 1973, p. 8. Quoted by Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

cannot be reduced to each other, at least not without introducing antinomies. Each aspect of meaning has its own structure or laws and though there is an unbreakable coherence between the aspects in any real event or fact they remain sovereign in their own area. Thus the laws and methods of physics cannot be applied to ethics, and the laws and methods of systematic theology cannot be applied to chemistry.

Secondly, and no less important, is the fact that since our theories in our favourite aspect are a fallible human reflection on the facts (and no more!), any attempt to use them as a test of the validity of theories in another aspect is highly dubious. The standard by which we measure must be absolutely accurate or measurements made with it are meaningless.

Dooyeweerd rejected *transcendent* criticism of theories in favour of a *transcendental* criticism. In transcendent criticism a theory in one aspect of reality is judged in terms of a theory in another aspect of reality. In transcendental criticism all theories in all aspects are judged from a perspective that lies beyond and above them all. This perspective is not a theoretical system but supremely *pre-theoretical*. It derives its content from the religious commitments we make. These religious commitments lie deep in the human heart and precede both logically and chronologically all our theorising. They are foundational for our theorising and direct its course. They are the grid or matrix, the paradigm or spectacles through which we grasp reality. Thus when the Christian reads his Bible and sees there that Jesus is God, he bows heart and knee in adoration and submission. All the "scientific" theories in creation cannot change his mind on this score. He begins with a religious commitment; if the "facts" don't fit the commitment then the facts are wrong. Similarly, the atheistic scientist cannot be convinced by any or all of the scientific facts that are thrown at him to disprove evolutionary theory. His commitment to evolution is not the result of studying the facts but is rather a prior heart-commitment to a particular view of what the world is. This is where he starts. All facts must fit this perspective or they are not facts. Particular philosophical theories, which drive particular scientific theories, are the fruit of different religious perspectives also. Philosophers and scientists would like to think that their differences are merely misunderstandings or logical errors that can be corrected by a more careful analysis of the facts. Dooyeweerd insisted that it was otherwise:

As a matter of fact, a Thomist has never succeeded by purely theoretical arguments in convincing a Kantian or a positivist of the tenability of a theoretical metaphysics. Conversely, the Kantian epistemology has not succeeded in winning over a single believing Thomist to critical idealism.³⁰

In his formulation of the transcendental critical method Dooyeweerd sought to analyse the nature of theoretical thought. He always drew a clear line of demarcation between *theoretical* and *naïve* (or non-theoretical) thought. The goal was to unmask the pretensions of the humanists in their claim that they could begin their researches from the standpoint of a neutral logic or reason. This claim of theirs was the reason, he maintained, why they thought that their differences were merely the result of logical error. Dooyeweerd's analysis set out to prove that there were underlying hidden pre-suppositions that actually gave each philosopher's and each scientist's theories their particular form. There is a structure to our thinking that depends on a set of conditions, which we have to agree upon before we even begin theorising. The Transcendental Critique was a program to discover that structure and to demonstrate how it was derived from one's religious presuppositions:

30. *New Critique*, Vol. I, p. 37.

In the last analysis we are not concerned with the question as to whether philosophical thought in its *factual* development has displayed an autonomous character making it independent of belief and religion. Much rather, the question at issue is whether this autonomy is required by the inner nature of thought, and thus is implied in this nature as an intrinsic possibility.

This question can only be answered by a transcendental criticism of the theoretical attitude of thought as such. By this we understand a radically critical inquiry into the universally valid conditions which alone make theoretical thought possible, and which are required by the inner structure and nature of this thought itself.³¹

Van Til had a field day with this. Theoretical thought *as such*? Is Dooyeweerd not putting forward a view of theoretical thought that is independent of religion after all? *Universally valid conditions*? Is this not a claim for conditions that are independent of the thinker's religious starting point? *Not at all*, Dooyeweerd retorted. But Van Til was not listening.³² By "theoretical thought as such" is meant the *process* of theoretical thinking rather than its *content*; the *way* we think not the *what* we think. Again, by "universally valid conditions" Dooyeweerd is describing the actual structures or laws that govern our thought, whatever faith commitment we have. He is saying that we are not autonomous, free to think as we like. There is a structure to thought, especially theoretical thought, that cannot be obviated any more than we can obviate the universally valid laws of chemistry and continue to live while we give up breathing in oxygen, or the universally valid laws of physics and expect to survive a jump off a one hundred-storey skyscraper. As Dooyeweerd pointed out, "universally valid" is not the same as "universally subjectively accepted." That the earth is a globe has always been a universally valid fact, even when it was far from being a universally subjectively accepted one.³³ And as he goes on to assert, he at all times insists that these universally valid conditions are God's structure for the universe, not neutral ones.

THE IDEA OF A RELIGIOUS GROUND-MOTIVE

As we have seen above, Dooyeweerd was able to show that the claims to a religiously neutral reason by non-Christians were flawed. Not only could he show that theoretical (scientific) thought did not require such a condition but also that even the claim itself was couched in terms of the thinker's true religious starting point; it meant one thing in Greek pagan philosophy, another in Thomistic scholasticism, and yet another in modern Humanistic thinking.

Every pre-theoretical starting point is religious in nature. That is, it is a heart commitment to a view of the world and how it is structured, a view of its origin and nature. Every man makes such a commitment before he comes to examine the "facts." It is not reasoned out but accepted prior to rational calculation. This view governs the way we see everything, and the way we explain it. It is responsible for the type of questions we raise about our world, and it is responsible for the type of answers we give to these questions.

31. Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley: Craig Press, 1968), p. 4.

32. See Van Til's criticism in E. R. Geehan (ed.), *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), in reply to Dooyeweerd's essay in which he categorically denies the construction that Van Til had been putting on his terminology.

33. I use this as an obvious example, though I have yet to find any evidence that the earth has ever been *widely* regarded as flat. It appears to be a modern attempt to denigrate a more believing age.

Dooyeweerd called this religious starting point the *ground-motive* of theoretical thought. In his extensive studies of Western intellectual history he succeeded in isolating four major ground-motives at work.³⁴

The earliest harks back to the great era of Greek philosophic thinking in the seventh to the fifth centuries B.C. It is referred to as the Form-Matter ground-motive. Early Greek religion had viewed the universe as fundamentally an ever-flowing, ceaselessly changing stream of life. Structure and order, laws and pattern, were thus regarded as "unnatural." The Bacchanalian orgy was a religious attempt to abandon law and custom and return to true freedom. We still see it today in such expressions as "letting your hair down," the idea that a wild fling is *real* living and an orderly life is refusal to live life to the full. Structure, order, law, morality, impede rather than enhance life. Later in Greek history the cult of the Olympian gods projected a quite different view of the world. They gave order and structure to an otherwise chaotic matter. This swing was not fortuitous. A continual emphasis on the chaotic is impossible; man is not built like that and cannot live like that. The Bacchanalian fling might be great fun for a day or two but it can only be "fun" within the context of an otherwise ordered society. And no one can escape the inexorable laws that reward dissolute behaviour. Thinking people, at least, were looking for some more "rational" meaning to the structures of the world and of society. On the other hand, an emphasis on the structure led in Plato's philosophy to a denigration of the real world. Now only philosophers, in their *theoria*, could see through to reality; the vulgar mob was living in a world of illusion. In Greek thought every attempt to describe the world was bedevilled by this starting point. Insistence on the form-principle distorted the picture; insistence on the matter-principle did the same. Clearly both could not be ultimate, yet Greek thought required that they be so.

In the Middle Ages, profound thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas sought to marry Christian thinking with Greek thinking and produced a ground-motive designated the Nature-Grace ground-motive. This split the world into "spiritual" and "natural" dimensions, having little or nothing in common. But as we have seen in the case of Galileo, any attempt to genuinely apply a logic independent of Christian faith to scientific studies could not be tolerated. For it truly did impinge on the validity of Christian faith. Contrariwise, a consistent application of a totally spiritual redemption could not be sustained without doing serious and obvious damage to man's earthly (and actual) existence.

The Renaissance introduced a further ground-motive, that of Nature-Freedom. This was at root a secularisation of Christian themes. The Renaissance began as the attempt to free man from the clutches of an impersonal universe; to raise him to the status of a god-like figure, in perfect control of his environment and master of his fate. This was a parody of the Christian conception of man as the image of God. But such a view could not be maintained without denigrating the external world and making it manageable. Thus it came to be seen in a mechanistic way. Only if it was thoroughly ordered like a machine and its "laws" known to man, could he hope to master it. Unfortunately, there is a sting in the tail: if the universe is as man was claiming, then he himself must be part of that mechanistic structure. As such he is totally immersed in the impersonal, law-governed structure. So how can he know anything? But again, he can only posit the mechanistic structure if he himself is above it, able to view it from a distance.

Each of these three ground-motives has at its root a bi-polar

vision of reality therefore.³⁵ And, what's more, the two poles are irreconcilable. Not so the Christian ground-motive. It has a consistent, triadic root consisting, in Dooyeweerd's own words, of "Creation, the fall, and redemption through Jesus Christ." Here creation becomes truly *temporal* and *relative*, no longer divinised as in non-Christian thought and no longer capable of providing the rationale for its own existence. It is totally dependent on God its originator, and it is totally structured according to his plan and purposes. The inclusion of the Fall in our fundamental view of this created reality is also necessary, ensuring that we understand that it is in what Abraham Kuyper called an *abnormal* rather than a *normal* state at present. We need to add the dimension of redemption too. Whereas the first two dimensions refer back to where we came from and where we now are, the third provides our view of the future of creation.

CONCLUSION

Dooyeweerdian philosophy is a contentious issue among Christians. Unfortunately the debate often descends to unseemly acrimony. Support of the party line becomes more important than finding the truth. I have no wish to become embroiled in this and this essay is aimed at clarifying what Dooyeweerd said rather than defending him. I have problems with Dooyeweerd, as I do with Rushdoony, Sandlin, Van Til, Jordan, North, Berthoud and many others. But I read them all avidly and learn a great deal from each.

Hopefully this essay will prove instructive and enlightening, especially to those who do not have the time or inclination to go to the fountainhead. I would appreciate comments and criticisms, whether for private or public discussion. C&S

imbibe, in various proportions, elements of each of the four abstract types.

35. We cannot do better than refer the interested reader to Dooyeweerd's *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Options* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) for his clearest explication of the ground-motives. Although out of print, it will shortly be re-published by the Dooyeweerd Centre as part of the *Collected Works*. There is also a first class treatment in his *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley: Craig Press, 1968).

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34. In practice, a thinker's actual viewpoint is much more complex than these basic motives suggest. In our culture, particularly, we