

HERMAN DOOYEWEERD: AN APPRECIATION

Nicholas Wolterstorff, Calvin College

NOTE: This discussion of certain elements of Dooyeweerd's philosophy was written in the 1960s and presented to a Calvin College Faculty Forum, when Prof. Wolterstorff was teaching philosophy there. When I prepared it for placement on the internet, Prof. Wolterstorff did go through it once more to make minor corrections. --Theodore Plantinga

* * * * *

Sir Isaiah Berlin once divided thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes -- those who see a few big things and those who see many little ones. Herman Dooyeweerd -- if you will pardon the tone of disrespect -- was a hedgehog par excellence. By that I mean that he was a *systematic* thinker. He was gripped by a few fundamental ideas whose articulation and ramifications he spent his entire lifetime pursuing, with a fascinating blend of imagination and relentlessness.

The great benefit of having a systematic thinker in one's midst is that, as the result of his work, one knows where those ideas go which he took as fundamental. Accordingly one is able to assess their acceptability with much greater reliability than before the systematician appeared. Yet, ironically, it is the fate of most great systematicians in their lifetime that the assessment, which their contribution makes possible, is evaded. For the characteristic fate of the systematician is to stir up in his public almost exclusively one or the other of two responses, neither of which constitutes an assessment of his fundamental ideas.

Some persons become disciples. Usually indeed the disciples will deny that they are disciples. As evidence they will point out that they have introduced certain revisions into the master's thought, or that the master left the system open and that they have explored one of the openings. But those who are not disciples will respond, rightly, that such moves do nothing at all to remove a person from the company of disciples. To be a disciple consists not in

tripping over every stone on which the master stumbled nor in sipping from every cup from which he drank. It consists in a certain bondage or allegiance to thought and spirit. The disciple himself may not be aware of his bondage. All that he may consciously experience is liberation from his earlier period of bewilderment and error.

Other persons, in response to the presence of the systematician in their midst, will either do their best to ignore him entirely or will criticize him on thoroughly superficial points, thinking that the defects pointed up justify them in ignoring him henceforth. Such people do what they can to put the new thought out of consciousness

I have spoken of two characteristic responses to the systematician. There is perhaps a third, the response of those who say, "But why must he carry things so far?" That response is the ultimate insult to the systematician. For his great virtue lies exactly in having carried things so far.

It is scarcely necessary for me to demonstrate to you assembled here that Dooyeweerd has suffered the characteristic fate of the systematician. His public has been polarized into disciples, ignorers, and worriers. In his lifetime there was almost no one who engaged him at a fundamental level. There was potential for a dialogue of profundity, but no such dialogue ever took place.

The true appreciation of a systematic thinker consists in coming to grips with the fundamental themes in his thought. Having seen where these themes lead, the true appreciator assesses the acceptability of those consequences and engages in radical re-thinking if that is deemed necessary. I wish my comments tonight to be understood in this spirit of true appreciation, as I do the preliminary work of digging out two fundamental themes in Dooyeweerd's thought which, in my judgment, you and I must eventually come to grips with. Unfortunately, the time-limitations of our discussion tonight make it impossible for me actually to do the work of "coming to grips with."

In his *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* Kant asked, concerning metaphysics, "If it be science, how is it that it cannot, like other sciences, obtain universal and lasting recognition?" He then went on to cite, as symptomatic of the diseased state of metaphysics, that "in this domain there

is actually as yet no standard weight and measure to distinguish sound knowledge from shallow talk." What these brief words indicate is that Kant held it to be a necessary condition of a discipline's being a true *scientia* that every dispute which can arise within the discipline be such that there be an agreed-on method for settling it. In this conviction, Kant was sharing in the overwhelming consensus of the Western tradition.

By contrast, one of Dooyeweerd's fundamental theses is that we must live in the expectation that over and over, in the academic disciplines, disagreements will arise of so fundamental a nature that there is and can be no agreed-on method for settlement. That at least is what we must expect in a religiously pluralistic society and tradition. For Dooyeweerd's contention is that we must expect divergence in *religious* commitment to lead to such disputes. Thus, Dooyeweerd took the radical position of holding that there are no *scientiae* on the traditional concept.

Dooyeweerd characteristically puts the point I have just made by speaking of the "traditional dogma" concerning the "autonomy" of theoretical thought, a dogma which implies, the "independence" of such thought "from all religious presuppositions"; and then to declare himself in opposition to this dogma. But here we must tread carefully or we will miss the true radicalness and originality of Dooyeweerd's position.

The West has not, as a whole, asserted the autonomy of theoretical thought. For in the history of the West there have been powerful traditions which repudiated "pure theory" and insisted that theorizing is of worth only when placed in the service of some human interest outside itself. Coming out of the Greeks, for example, is the view that the theorist contemplates the eternal order of the cosmos, that in so doing his own soul becomes ordered in imitation of the order of the cosmos, and that this moral self-improvement of the soul constitutes the fundamental benefit to be gotten from theorizing. This tradition lives on in the Western world, in the person of those who insist that practicing the methodology of academic learning makes us more tolerant, more judicious, and in general, morally better human beings. For all such thinkers, learning is to be practiced in the service of morality. Then too there was the tradition of the Renaissance humanists who, in opposition to the theorizing of the schoolmen, recommended hermeneutical studies of the

classical texts supplemented by historical studies of the classical period, recommending this because they believed that thereby the scholar would become a cultured human being. Scholarship in their view was to be practiced in the service of becoming cultured. And then of course there is the whole Baconian tradition which urges that theorizing is to be practiced in the service of the cause of altering our physical and social circumstances so as to make them conform more closely to our desires. In all these traditions, academic learning is not to be practiced for its own sake but in the service of some human interest extrinsic to it.

But here we must make a distinction. We must distinguish between, on the one hand, the purpose for which scholarship is pursued, a purpose which may, as in the case of the humanists and the Baconians, determine the direction of one's theoretical inquiries; and on the other hand, what the scholar comes to believe on the topics under consideration. When someone speaks of the autonomy of theoretical thought he may mean to be saying something about either of these two quite different things: He may mean that theoretical thought is to be pursued for its own sake and that all decisions as to which line of investigation to pursue are to be made by reference to one's judgment as to which line of thought is more likely to produce the most inherently worthwhile cognitive states of consciousness; or he may mean that one's decisions as to which theories to adopt on the matters under investigation are to be autonomously arrived at.

The traditions to which I have pointed all denied autonomy in the first sense. They all held that learning is to be in the service of something outside itself. Virtually the entire Western tradition has affirmed autonomy in the second sense, however. And it is precisely at this point that Dooyeweerd's originality comes to light. Dooyeweerd *denies* autonomy in the second sense. He insists that a scholar's decisions as to which theories to accept and which to reject are not all autonomously arrived at, and *cannot be*. (I think that what Dooyeweerd meant to affirm in thus speaking was that the body of theory neither is nor can be arrived at by means of reasons, which to be rational one must adopt, from a foundation of propositions, which to be rational one must accept.) The fact that man is religious, argued Dooyeweerd, makes untenable this foundationalist vision which has so deeply gripped Western man.

Tonight I do not wish to analyze and assess these particular claims; though I may add that I myself have argued along roughly Dooyeweerdian lines in my book *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*. Rather I wish to call your attention to the fact that Dooyeweerd was in effect arguing that the status which the Western tradition had come to assign to theology is in fact a status that every discipline shares in common with theology.

Think, for example, of Aquinas' characteristic way of distinguishing between theology and all the non-theological disciplines. The non-theological disciplines as a whole, said Aquinas, move from creatures up to God, whereas theology moves down from God to creatures. But much more importantly, in the non-theological disciplines we appeal solely to the deliverances of reason; whereas theology is based on faith and its correlative, revelation. What should be added, in fairness to Aquinas, is that he was nonetheless of the conviction that theology is a true *scientia*, measuring up to the condition Kant formulated. For he held that when the limitations of sin and corporeality are removed and we attain the state of beatitude, then we will see that it would be irrational to deny the claims of Christian teaching. He agreed though that the theologian, in his present state of turpitude and corporeality, must unabashedly accept on faith the deliverances of revelation and move out from there to develop his theology.

The Thomistic appeal to the rationality of the blessed, as a defense for the claim that theology measures up to the conditions formulated by Kant for a true *scientia*, is of course something that few modern and contemporary thinkers sympathize with. They agree of course that the Christian theologian appeals to what he takes on faith, and that his doing so is intrinsic to the construction of theology. But they would conclude, from just these facts, that Christian theology is not and can not be a genuine *scientia*.

And now look once again at Dooyeweerd. Dooyeweerd held that the incursion of religious faith -- be it Christian or otherwise -- occurs inescapably in all the disciplines. Thus none of them measures up to Kant's, or indeed Aquinas', condition for a true *scientia*. All of them in fact have the status traditionally assigned to Christian theology, when the appeal to the rationality of the blessed is removed.

In my judgment, Dooyeweerd's removal of the traditional line of demarcation between theology and the non-theological disciplines should be experienced by the theologian as liberation. No longer need the theologian feel obliged to accept the conclusions of the philosopher, the physicist, the sociologist, as settled fact, autonomously arrived at, into which he must somehow squeeze Christian theology: It is open to the theologian to function as *critic* of the non-theological disciplines. Furthermore, I suspect that where this liberation is genuinely experienced there will open up before the theologian the real possibility of overcoming the strange polarity in contemporary theology between theologies in which redemption is absorbed into creation and theologies in which redemption is opposed to creation.

But rather than pursuing those thoughts tonight let me call to your attention that Dooyeweerd's dissolution of the traditional distinction between theology and the non-theological disciplines presented him with the challenge of reformulating that distinction. It was a challenge from which he did not shrink. In my judgment, however, it was also a challenge that he could not possibly meet satisfactorily, given a second major theme in his thought to which I wish now to call your attention -- the first theme being, remember, that the presence of religion in human existence results in the fact that the Kantian condition for a true *scientia* is not met by any of the disciplines.

Though I spoke of a *second* theme, perhaps the situation might better be thought of as a pair of themes whose conjunction leads to what I have in mind. In the first place, Dooyeweerd held that every concept possessed by a human being is limited in its applicability to what he often called "the temporal horizon." That is to say, every concept is limited in its applicability to things in time. By this he did not mean to say that we cannot *know* whether our concepts do or do not apply to whatever lies outside of time. He meant to say that we know that they do *not* apply, and can not apply. Take any concept whatsoever -- that of *loving*, for example. What we can know is that this concept applies to nothing outside of time. And to those philosophers among you who are ready to protest that then the concept of *not-loving* must apply to what lies outside of time, Dooyeweerd would reply, I presume, that to deny that a concept applies to something is not to affirm that the complement (negative) of that concept applies to it. I am not aware that Dooyeweerd ever developed his thought on this particular matter; but I suspect that he was

thinking that there are no negative concepts, only affirmative ones. (In denying that any of our concepts are applicable outside of time Dooyeweerd was of course operating within the Kantian tradition on this matter, though, I think, taking a somewhat more radical stance than even Kant took.)

So the first member of the pair of themes is that our concepts lack applicability to what lies outside of time. And the second member is that God is outside of time. On this point Dooyeweerd followed in the major tradition of Western thought, beginning among the Greeks, according to which God is eternal rather than everlasting.

When we now conjoin these two themes we get the conclusion that none of our concepts applies to God. All of them are to be denied of God. We get, in short, a radical version of the *via negativa* -- not quite as radical a version as that of Plotinus, who held that we cannot even make true denials about God; but certainly radical, more radical than Maimonides, for example.

And now of course the question arises with painful urgency: What is it that the theologian is doing, if not applying concepts to God? And more basic, what is it that Christians around the world are doing when they confess their belief that God is the *maker of heaven and earth*? And more basic yet, what was it that St. Paul was doing when he said that God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to himself, if not applying the concept of *reconciling* to God?

Before I explain the strategy that Dooyeweerd adopted for getting out of the bind that all who adopt exclusively the *via negativa* find themselves in, let me show that what might appear to be some escape hatches in his thought, whereby he can avoid the traditional bind, are in fact not that at all.

In the first place, Dooyeweerd holds that in addition to our awareness of entities occurring in time, and in addition to the concepts we have which apply to such entities, we have what he calls *theoretical intuition*. [NOTE 1] Of the self and of cosmic time we have no genuine concepts. Both transcend the temporal horizon of our experience; both are conditions of experience rather than items therein. Yet I do have an awareness of all my experience as being mine, as being of *my self*; and therein and thereby I also have an awareness of cosmic time as something expressed in all my experience. Such

awareness Dooyeweerd calls *theoretical* intuition. But though he affirmed that we can intuit what does not lie within time, certainly he never held that *God* is available to theoretical intuition as one of its objects.

Secondly, Dooyeweerd held that we have what he calls *limiting concepts*. Though he regularly uses this notion of a limiting concept, I know of no passage in which he explains the notion. Quite obviously, though, he is borrowing here from Kant, who used the same terminology. Kant's thought was this: In reflecting on experience and its conditions we find ourselves forced to think of it as bearing various relations to what lies beyond experience. In thus thinking of experience as related to what lies beyond it, we will of course be thinking of that relation as satisfying a certain concept. And a concept thus used is a limiting concept, or more strictly, a concept used as a limiting concept. The concept itself will be a concept which has application within and only within experience. But the concept is used to think of experience as related to the transcendent in such a way that the relation satisfies the concept, *even though it does not*. Every use by Dooyeweerd which I have come across of the phrase "limiting concept" seems to me quite clearly to be in accord with this Kantian concept.

Thirdly, Dooyeweerd often speaks about our *knowledge of God*, or more fully our *central religious knowledge of God*. Is not that an indication that I am misrepresenting him when I construe him as holding a radical version of the *via negativa*? Not at all. What Dooyeweerd invariably means when he speaks of someone as knowing God is that God by his Power has regenerated that person so that in his life as a whole God is now acknowledged as absolute. To know God is simply to be directed *by* God toward God in such a way that God's status as Absolute is acknowledged in one's life. Dooyeweerd never tires of insisting that one's central religious knowledge of God is not conceptual knowledge. It is life-orientation.

So though Dooyeweerd insists that we have a theoretical intuition of entities not found within time, that we have limiting concepts of entities not found within time, and that there is central religious knowledge of God who is not within time, none of these insistences does anything whatsoever to impair the thorough consistency with which he holds that none of our concepts applies to God, and that we know that none of them does.

But how then does Dooyeweerd interpret the statements of Scripture, and the content of the Christian confessions, and the work of the Christian theologian?

Well, Dooyeweerd was of the view, using now his own words, that the plenitude and unity of God's Being is expressed in the unity of man and the coherence of temporal reality's diversity. This cosmic self-expression of God is what constitutes God's *natural revelation*. Likewise it is what constitutes God's being the *absolute origin* of the self and of temporal reality; and conversely, it is what constitutes *the reference* of self and temporal reality to God. In these various phrasings we are dealing with the same phenomenon: God's cosmic self-expression.

In addition to this cosmic self-expression of God -- or strictly, of the plenitude and unity of God's Being -- there is also what Dooyeweerd calls God's "Word-revelation." The word "Word" here is somewhat misleading, however, for this mode of revelation is not to be understood in terms of God speaking. It is rather to be understood as the power of God -- the *dynamis* of God as Dooyeweerd often calls it -- operating on man's transcendent self so that the person in his life acknowledges self and temporal reality to be expressions of the plenitude and unity of God's Being. In short, God's Word-revelation is simply that dynamic of God which impels us into what was called, just above, central religious knowledge of God, which in turn is simply life-acknowledgment of God; cosmic self-expression, God's dynamis, does not inform us about his cosmic self-expression. It impels us into life-acknowledgment thereof. Word-revelation and natural revelation are thus interlocked: God's dynamis impels us into life-acknowledgment of God's cosmic self-expression.

Now Dooyeweerd always regarded *faith* as something distinct from the central religious knowledge of God (which he also calls *true religion*). That is to say, faith is distinct from life-acknowledgment of God's cosmic self-expression. Faith is believing, confessing. Faith shows up in creeds. And there's more to life-acknowledgment of God's cosmic self-expression than confessing, though on the other hand, that is indeed a part of it.

As to the fundamental nature of *Christian* confession, Dooyeweerd held that it is simply the confession that God's dynamis has in fact directed one's life into acknowledgment of God's cosmic self-expression. Thus Christian confession, God's dynamis, God's cosmic self-expression, and the life-acknowledgment of God's cosmic self-expression, are all interlocked.

Many critics have contended that when all this is put together we have something verging on mysticism. In fact, though, Dooyeweerd always took it into a very non-mystical direction indeed. Always he insisted that God's dynamis "is manifested," "is presented," "is embodied," "is revealed," "enters into" time, in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. And the relation of Christian confession to this manifestation he regarded as two-fold. For one thing, the Christian confesses that Christ and Scripture are in fact manifestations of God's dynamis. (Though exactly what such confession amounts to, I think he never says.) And secondly, the Christian accepts Christ and Scripture as norm for his confession.

And now we are coming close to the crux of the matter. Scripture is norm for Christian confession. But notice. It is not norm in the sense that we are to regard the words which in our confession we apply to God as expressing concepts which in fact apply to God. For remember, none of our concepts applies to God. To allow the Scriptures to function as norm for one's confession is to think and speak about God as they do, but not to think that the concepts one thereby uses *apply* to God. It is, for example, to think and speak of God as loving, without believing that the concept of love applies to God.

The language of confession is a language of analogies, says Dooyeweerd, all drawn from other dimensions (modalities) of our existence than the modality of faith itself -- *analogiae fidei* Dooyeweerd calls them. All such analogical language must be seen as expressing limiting concepts when applied to God. The concept of love, for example, applies within temporal reality, not outside it; but in fidelity to Scripture we must think and speak of temporal reality *as if* it were the expression of an Absolute Origin who loves. Again, the concept of creation applies within temporal reality, not outside it; but in fidelity to Scripture we must think and speak of temporal reality *as if* it were the expression of an Absolute Origin who creates. And so forth. I think you can

see now why Dooyeweerd says in some passages that all predications concerning God consist of taking concepts applicable exclusively within temporal reality and then using them all to express just one thing, namely, God's absoluteness. We take a concept x , and then think of temporal reality as if it were the expression of an Absolute Origin which satisfies that concept.

And as to which concepts are appropriately used as such limiting concepts, the Christian must allow his thought and speech to be normed by Scripture. We must not be so bold as to think that somehow we can get beyond Scripture. We must think and speak within its framework.

In my experience the disciples of Dooyeweerd are seldom aware of the full radicalness of what he is saying here. Following Dooyeweerd they typically insist that God has revealed that we should think of him as creator, as faithful, etc., insisting at the same time that God satisfied neither these nor any other concepts. But notice: Dooyeweerd also holds that it is not true of God that he reveals. The concept of reveal no more applies to God than any other. On Dooyeweerd's view it is not true of God that he has revealed that we should think of him as creator and as faithful. And once one notices this, then everything begins to whirl and reel.

In the tradition of theology one finds two substantially different doctrines of analogy; I think it will help us to see the drift of Dooyeweerd's thought if I briefly distinguish them here. According to the medieval doctrine of analogy we can in fact formulate true affirmative assertions about God. But when we do so our words will characteristically be functioning analogically. By contrast, according to Kant's doctrine of analogy we cannot formulate true affirmative assertions about God. Yet we neither have to be silent concerning God, nor need we regard everything said about God as equally acceptable. On the contrary; we are to sift through the multiplicity of candidates for acceptable predications concerning God by reference to which mode of thought and speech concerning God will best serve certain important human purposes (other, of course, than that of stating the truth). Kant himself thought that the relevant purpose was the human moral life. Thus Kant's full doctrine was that we ought to think and speak about experience as if, for example, it were created by a loving God; and that we ought to do so because

that will enhance the human moral life. In a fascinatingly similar way Plotinus, who said that we can say nothing at all true of God, negative or affirmative, held that we should sift through the candidates for predications concerning God by reference to what will serve the purpose of inducing the mystic vision

My suggestion is that if we are at all to understand Dooyeweerd we must see that he is thinking of analogy along Plotinian/Kantian lines, not along medieval lines. None of what is said affirmatively of God is true of him. Yet some modes of thought and speech are to be preferred above others, the preferred ones being the biblical modes of thought and speech. They are not, indeed, to be preferred because they conduce to the mystic vision, nor because they support the human moral life. Rather they are to be preferred, so far as I can make out, because they conduce to obedience, to true piety. Once one sees that Dooyeweerd holds this particular version of the Kantian doctrine of analogy, then one can see at a glance why he is so insistent on speaking the full language of the Scriptures, while at the same time insisting that none of it is true of God.

So what, finally, is the business of the theologian on Dooyeweerd's view? His business is, in general, to deal with the confessional aspect of reality; and then, more specifically to articulate the structure of confession, which, as we have seen, is confession normed by the language of Scripture -- *Christian* confession. Thus theology becomes, at its core, a hermeneutic discipline, and one of a very "positive" (note, I do not say, positivistic) sort. One studies the Scriptures to discover the patterns of thought and confession of the biblical writers -- these being normative for contemporary confession. But that is all one studies them to discover. One does not study them to learn about God.

I said earlier that Dooyeweerd, having broken down the old line of demarcation between philosophy and theology, set about to draw a new line; and I added that I thought there were themes in his philosophy which prevented him from achieving his project in anywhere near a satisfactory way. What I had in mind was that, in my judgment, it is unacceptable to hold that God has revealed nothing true of himself in the context of calling us to and guiding us into obedience. My own conviction is that God is in love working for the redemption of mankind -- not that it is useful to the cause of

true piety to think and speak *as if* God is doing that, but that he is in fact doing that. That he *really* is. And my reason for believing so is that God has revealed it -- that he really *has* revealed it, not just that it is useful for the cause of true piety to think and speak as if he has revealed it. The agnosticism of Dooyeweerd's *via negativa* seems to me unacceptable for a Christian. To argue, as he so passionately does, that we must in all our ways be faithful to God, and then to add that of this God to whom we are to be faithful we know nothing affirmative, seems to me incoherent.

In addition, Dooyeweerd's *via negativa* yields deep incoherencies within his own philosophical thought. He speaks of the plenitude and unity of God's Being, he speaks of God as the Absolute Origin, he speaks of God as expressing himself, and no doubt he would say that God has often been referred to by himself. But none of the concepts here used applies to God either -- and neither, I suppose, does the concept of God apply to God. So Dooyeweerd's own philosophy is not, on his doctrine, to be taken for true on some of its most fundamental points. The situation is not that *there is* an Absolute Origin and that we are to think about it as if it loves. The situation is rather that we are to think of temporal reality as if it were the expression of an Absolute Origin.

But my aim tonight has not been to engage the issues with Dooyeweerd. I felt it would have been inappropriately coy on my part not to give you some indication of where I myself stand on the theses I have highlighted. But a responsible engaging of the issues would take much more time than we have here tonight.

I have come to think that the fundamental issue to be considered is whether the biblical idea of the sovereignty of God can appropriately be explicated by the philosopher's and theologian's concept of an unconditioned condition of everything not identical with itself. And that is a complex matter. Tonight my aim has only been to highlight some fundamental issues in Dooyeweerd, issues of which he was himself fully aware, issues on which he took decisive stands, issues whose ramifications he pursued in relentless and imaginative fashion, though also issues that his disciples often slide over; and then to stress that you and I will not have engaged in a true appreciation of Dooyeweerd until we engage him on such fundamental issues as these. In

turn, unless we do so engage him, the potential greatness of his contribution to us -- Christian scholars who wish to join him in service to our Lord -- will never be realized.

* * * * *

NOTES

NOTE 1

New Critique, II, pp. 473-479.

NOTE 2

Jerusalem and Athens, pp. 86-87.

NOTE 3

See especially *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, pp. 136-138, 143-144; and "Verhouding tussen wijsbegeete en theologie" in *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol.23, 1958.