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Closer Look at "Serviceable Insight": A Discussion Paper

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Closer Look at "Serviceable Insight": A Discussion Paper

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A Closer Look at "Serviceable Insight":

A Discussion Paper

1. From the very beginning of our discussion about serviceable insight we wish to expressly exclude certain psychological and psychiatric meanings, such as the following:
 - a. 'Insight' means a sudden grasping of a solution; i.e., problem-solving insight and configurational learning.
 - b. 'Insight' means the ability of a mental patient to know that he is suffering from a mental disorder.

Although definitions of this sort may figure into our understanding of serviceable insight at some point, as they stand they are altogether too narrow and specific to be useful.

2. We also wish to exclude certain meanings which appear to have been influenced by centuries of rationalism and scientism. I am thinking here of the definition of insight as "immediate and clear learning that takes place without recourse to overt trial and error behavior or to methodical means of analysis." This tends to turn insight, or at least the acquisition of insight, into some kind of non-rational or irrational process. Again, while this may be the case in certain forms of insight, we do not wish to limit the meaning of the term in this way.

3. It should be understood that the following remarks focus on the content of serviceable insight, not on its acquisition. For the moment I wish to leave open the question of how insight is attained, in order to concentrate on what it is.

4. I see the term 'serviceable insight' relate closely to the Scriptural concepts 'wisdom', 'knowledge', and 'understanding'. This is not the place to engage in extensive exegesis. Nevertheless, the general contours of these terms can readily be sketched. We think, for example, of Psalm 111:10 -- "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do His commandments." Or again, take Paul's admonishment in Ephesians 5:15-17 -- "Look carefully, then, how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Or again, James 3:13 -- "Who is wise among you? Let him show by his good life his works in meekness of wisdom." Numerous other passages can be cited to illustrate that according to the Scriptures wisdom and understanding function in subjection to a norm ("do His commandments"; "understand what the will of the Lord is," etc.), and that it involves the ability to act according to that norm ("fear of Jehovah"; "look how you walk"; "let him show"; etc.).

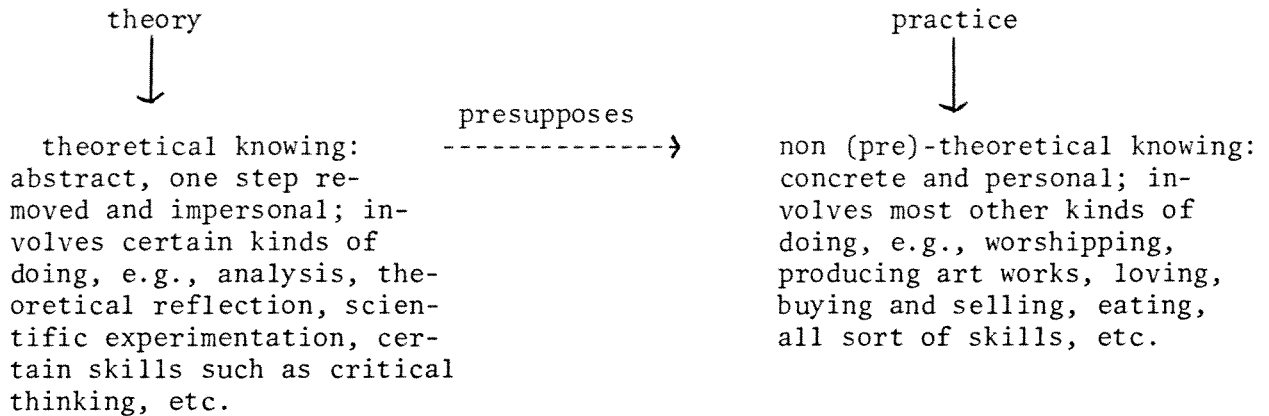
5. That genuine Biblical wisdom and understanding is a normative sort of thing is clear from the many passages expressing the antithesis running through wisdom and understanding; for example, in the Pauline contrast between the "foolishness of the cross" and the "wisdom of the world" (e.g., I Cor. 1, 2, and 3; cf. Matth. 11:25; James 3:15 ff.). Paul speaks, furthermore, of "spiritual wisdom" (Col. 1:9 and 10) and "fleshly wisdom" (II Cor. 1:12). We must be careful not to interpret these terms within the context of nature and grace, as if 'spiritual wisdom' means 'knowledge of spiritual (whatever that means) things' and as if 'fleshly wisdom' refers to a knowledge of 'lower (natural?) things.' 'Spirit' and 'flesh' do not mean 'soul' and

'body' (as Augustine, heavily influenced by Platonism, thought), or grace and nature, but the principle of obedience and disobedience. Spiritual wisdom is obedient, normative wisdom (in short, 'serviceable insight'), while fleshly wisdom is worldly, proud, and arrogant wisdom, the kind of wisdom that ignores God and His redemptive Word, and which is therefore fundamentally foolishness.

6. From the above I infer that the adjective 'serviceable' is not redundantly added to 'insight.' For in fact there is a great deal of worldly insight. Secularism has attained to a deep understanding of the workings of God's created order (which it has turned into "nature"). Unbelievers often display insight into, e.g., normative marriage relationships, so that at times they experience a happier marriage than many Christians do. This kind of insight is derived from the impinging Word of God for all creational functioning. Men cannot escape the "theatrum Dei," as Calvin called it, but are everywhere confronted by a creation structured and upheld by the power of God's Word (Heb. 1:2; II Peter 3:5). Worldly insight into God's workings in creation remains at root foolishness, however, since it does not place things in a proper perspective, it ultimately ends up absolutizing some relative aspect of the creation (e.g., man's mind, natural law, historical process, or any of a host of other possibilities), and promotes unbelief with all its concomitant evils such as pride, selfishness, and greed. Worldly insight is therefore insight to some extent, but it is not serviceable insight. In some humanitarian way it may at times appear serviceable, but such appearances deceive, since in the long run the refusal to fear God leads to disarray and servicelessness. We must add, of course, that often Christians, in spite of pious confessions, exhibit an appalling lack of serviceable insight. Indeed, sin clings to us and prevents us from rightly fearing the Lord and doing His commandments. Such sinfulness must never become an excuse, however, for then our sinfulness becomes the norm. The Lord demands that we be perfect; hence we are to work for perfect insight.

7. If we are correct in closely linking 'insight' to the Biblical concepts of 'wisdom' and 'understanding,' then it is clear that serviceable insight must have built into it the capability of taking correct, normative action (cf. passages cited, where wisdom is connected with doing God's commandments, watching how we walk, showing by our good life, etc.). Serviceable insight is therefore not just a matter of knowing and not doing. We want to tread carefully here, lest we become ensnared in a controversy that has its roots in the ancient world, viz., the question about the relationship between knowing and doing, theory and practice, knowledge and virtue, or "reason" and act. Suffice it to say that historically the terms in these relations have been polarized, as if they are totally separate things, as if knowing and doing are mutually exclusive activities. A faulty anthropology lies at the bottom here, viz., one which sees man as composed of separable faculties. One senses the artificiality of such separations when it is realized that thinking or reasoning is itself an act. The fact of the matter is that all knowing involves doing and all doing involves knowing (just as faith and "reason" are not two separate faculties: all "reason" involves faith, and all faith involves "reason"). Of course, definitions of 'doing' and 'knowing' are important here. When I am talking about the interrelatedness of knowing and doing, I am using the term 'doing' in its classical sense (since we are talking about a classical problem), i.e., understood as an intentional human act. We are dealing here, among other things, with the fascinating principle of "sphere universality," which we must leave aside for now.

8. At the same time it does make good sense, it seems to me, to speak of theory and practice as two dimensions of our experience; just so long as we do not identify 'knowing' with theory and 'doing' with practice. Such an identification would imply that 'doing' is some sort of mindless thing and 'knowing' a form of static inactivity; this gets us stuck in the ancient problems again. The following diagram is designed to show how 'knowing' and 'doing' are both present in both theory and practice:



In essence theorizing is the act of reflecting on our practical concrete experience. Theory bears, therefore, a pronounced analytic character: it analyzes what we pre-theoretically experience and know. Theory, furthermore, presupposes pre-theoretical experience and knowledge: I must be able to tell a tree from a star in order to engage in botany or astronomy.

9. Theoretic knowledge is meant to be a servant, not a master (as Plato thought), in everyday non-theoretic knowledge and experience. This may become clearer if we ask ourselves what it is that we focus on in theoretic, reflective knowledge. The answer is: the nature of things as they function in subjection to God's norms (or laws and ordinances, or, simply, the will of the Lord). Take the example of the family. Theoretic knowledge of the family is one-step-removed reflection about the structure of the family and how it is to function according to God's norms. We can call such knowledge "one-step-removed," since I can be an orphan and engage in this kind of reflection as easily as one of a family of ten. Non-theoretic knowledge of the family on the other hand, needs the actual setting of the family and contact with it. When the father in the home is faced with a problem, he ordinarily uses his practical knowledge and experience to solve it. Of course, a theoretic (one-step-removed) understanding of the structure of and norms for the family ought to help him in his practical dealings with his family. Such is the case with all theoretic knowledge: it is meant to be applied, and in that way it is meant to assist us in our practical life. Note that theoretic knowledge does not necessarily lead to more effective and normative living: someone may have extensive theoretic knowledge of what a family should be, yet have himself a bummer of a family! Another example: theology is a theoretical science and as such should assist Christians to live more deeply Christian lives. But surely a great knowledge of theology does not automatically lead to a more Christian life. Some theologians lead offensive lives, while, e.g., my grandmother (who lived to be 102) knew no theology other than what she had learned in catechism 90 years earlier, and she was one of the finest, wisest Christians I have ever known. In spite of this, I am nevertheless arguing that theoretic knowledge ought to assist non-theoretic experience. Failure of it to do so is due, in my view, to circumstances other than those directly related to the character of theoretic knowledge.

10. It needs to be emphasized at this point that theoretic knowledge and pre-theoretic knowledge are not two totally separate things. Such a view would be tantamount to some form of Platonism, where intellectual comprehension of the eternal Ideas is part of reality while everyday experience is little more than appearance. There is a radical unity to our experience. When a scientist is theoretically busy, he is not really in another world: while doing his science he remains a person, integrated with his environment. Theoretic knowledge involves an analytical attitude, and not some imagined faculty such as "reason." It involves a kind of doing, viz., a reflective, one-step-removed analysis of some field of investigation, which results in a kind of understanding meant to assist men in the fullness of life (again, in opposition to Plato, for whom abstractions were the really real, not in need of reintegration).

11. Serviceable insight is of the kind in which all theoretic knowledge does in fact provide assistance to non-theoretic experience. In other words, the theoretic one-step-removed reflection we engage in at Dorcht must never be ivory-towerish and ten-steps-removed remotely abstract, far away from the ordinary doings of people. One goal in all of our instruction should be to reintegrate our abstractions and to show how they advance our ability to live as Christians before the face of the Lord.

12. Serviceable insight is not really serviceable if there is not built into it the practical ability to implement, in normative fashion, these theoretic and non-theoretic understandings. We intuitively sense this, I think. I mean, we sense that for insight to be insight, there must be present some ability to take corrective action once a problem is encountered and understood. What I am claiming, then, is that serviceable insight involves not only a "knowing what," but also a "knowing how." I do not mean that Dorcht, in providing "know how," must produce experts. It seems clear that at least at this point in time it would be unreasonable to expect of us that we train, e.g., M.D.'s. A medical doctor needs to have the high level of skill built into serviceable insight that nowadays only a medical school can provide. However, the serviceable insight which we provide should contain enough "know how" for a Dorcht graduate to enter a medical school and to function there as a genuinely Christian medical student. From his stay at Dorcht he should have obtained serviceable insight into the world (the "structural fields" of my earlier paper), civilization ("directional fields"), and into his calling and task in life ("vocational"). With respect to the last of these three, our budding M.D. must graduate from Dorcht with a good measure of know-how built into the serviceable insight needed for his task, although in his case this know-how and insight must be further developed in medical school. The "know-how" ingredient to be built into serviceable insight, therefore, will be of a somewhat variable character, depending to some extent on a student's calling and vocational task.

13. A further aspect of the "knowing how" ingredient of serviceable insight needs to be examined, viz., the role of the so-called skills. First of all, in our thinking about skills we tend to be influenced by rationalism and scientism as well as by the old problem of knowing versus doing. This is evident when, for example, we see skill as essentially separate from thought or mental involvement. Skill is then reduced to a nearly mechanical status. It might be more fruitful, it seems to me, to think of a skill as anything that one does well. When we do something in bumbling fashion we exhibit a lack of skill. Skill, then, applies to all of men's doings. Now, in providing serviceable insight (and hence with "knowing how" included) it is our task to teach our students to do things well (i.e., in an effective and normative manner). In order that our graduates may function as effective Kingdom citizens in their stations in life they need to be able to think critically, communicate clearly, remain physically fit, and to be able to carry out whatever doings are needed in their occupations or in their further preparations for their occupations.

14. Because of certain historical developments a number of courses in our curriculum have come to be regarded as "skills," e.g., logic, speech, and P.E. At the moment I do not really see a principial reason why these three and others like it (e.g., musical skills) are to be regarded as essentially different from, e.g., theology or philosophy or whatever, at least, not when we take as our starting premise the proposition that a skill is anything we do well. Take logic, considered as the skill of critical and logical thinking. Clearly such a "skill" reflects a theoretic understanding of, let's say, the rules (norms) of logic. The "skill" of logic is in fact nothing else than a theoretic understanding applied to and assisting non-theoretical everyday experience. We reflect on logic in order to develop ability to think critically. And so with other skills. But my argument throughout has been that any theoretic understanding be applied to and be made to assist non-theoretic experience (see above, point 11), if it is to count as an ingredient of serviceable insight. The business of "academic subject" vs. "skill" is, I believe, a hangover of the rationalistic problem of knowledge vs. act. I am arguing that any so-called academic "liberal arts" subject be made into a "skill," i.e., to be incorporated into serviceable insight, enabling the Dordt graduate to be -- to use a worn-out phrase -- made relevant, i.e., reintegrated into the fullness of experience. The study of theology and philosophy and history should indeed assist students to be better Christians. The fact that in some cases certain skills can be learned without apparent recourse to theoretical underpinnings does not affect my argument. For in such cases no real serviceable insight is transmitted, it seems to me. That is precisely my quarrel with the voc-tech schools: they reduce life and insight to merely the so-called skills by minimizing theoretic philosophical and historical study. They imply -- in technicistic fashion -- that life is no more than a "skill," so nothing is needed but "training" in technical skills. It is precisely this same attitude, prevalent on most high school campuses, which makes it so difficult to motivate incoming students to take a broad program at Dordt. And I think it is for this reason, too, that we should insist upon students taking theology, philosophy, history, and other core courses at Dordt. Even a skill such as typing, for example, ought to be taught in association with courses in business, economics, and communication, as well as the wider contextual fields such as history, theology, and philosophy. After all, for a Christian -- whether called to be a typist or a theologian -- life is not merely earning a living via a collection of marketable skills: Christians are to walk in wisdom and understanding, redeeming the time; and for that they need serviceable insight in order to discern the spirits of our complex age.

15. Serviceable insight involves not only a knowing what and a knowing how, but also a knowing why. I am thinking here of the need to develop a genuinely Christian attitude towards serviceable insight. The goal and effort to develop such an attitude should permeate all transmission of serviceable insight. As I indicated in my previous paper, such development the college shares with the home and the church. I suspect that the rationale for devotional and social activities on a college campus is to be located somewhere near this ingredient of serviceable insight.

16. To sum up, asking "What is serviceable insight?" is a bit like asking "What is faith?" Nevertheless, enough has been said to sketch the content. Serviceable insight is the kind of insight that includes both theoretic and practical (non-theoretic) knowledge. That is, serviceable insight counts as components both the one-step-removed reflection and an understanding of how to work out these reflections in non-theoretic experience. Moreover, both the reflective and the practical understandings included in serviceable insight focus on norms, i.e., on the will of the Lord. The central meaning of God's will is this: Love God with all your heart, and the neighbor as yourself. Thus the insight is to be serviceable, in that it obeys this central

command and thereby advances the coming of the Kingdom of the Lord and the well-being of all. For we know that the Lord will bless if we obey Him, curse if we do not. We can specify all of this more concretely by asking What is the serviceable insight that we wish the Dordt graduate to have attained? The answer would include the following elements, all of which together constitute the content of serviceable insight:

- (1) a theoretic one-step-removed understanding of God's will (norms and laws) for the created order and human life in it (involves all fields of investigation as listed in my earlier paper)
- (2) an understanding of how this theoretic understanding applies to, assists, and advances normative non-theoretic experience, i.e., the Christian life in all its fullness
- (3) a practical ability to implement normatively these understandings in everyday life, wherever the graduate may find himself
- (4) a willingness to serve in loving obedience as a Kingdom citizen.

17. Two remarks remain. First, the four elements listed above are not to be regarded as separate independent entities. They constitute dimensions of the one serviceable insight. These dimensions interplay and are intertwined. Secondly, we must remind ourselves that we are talking about the ideal, that is, the norm. In actual practice, of course, we will find that the transmission of truly normative serviceable insight is a well-nigh impossible task. After all, there are so many different levels of capabilities and talents. Besides, our own insight into serviceable insight is dismally vague and unclear. In practice we can hope to achieve the transmission of only some insight on certain levels and in certain cases. But all of this ought not to discourage us from trying for the ideal (norm) of perfect serviceable insight. To use an illustration I have learned from Calvin Seerveld: if the Lord should come back today, in all likelihood He would not ask "Have you people achieved the transmission of perfect serviceable insight?" But surely He would ask: "Are you people busy working at it?"

John Van Dyk

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