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Dooyeweerd and the Discussion About Science



by C. A. van Peursen

The relationship between Dooyeweerd and contemporary scientific discussion is, to my mind, remarkably paradoxical.¹ Dooyeweerd's system lies in the past, but its relevance is becoming even greater now. On the other hand, given Dooyeweerd's timeliness, contemporary scientific discussion is, though realized by few, in many ways

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dated and passé. This development is a reversal in the normal course of affairs.

Why is that? First of all, I think that Dooyeweerd, both in our time as well as in his, with remarkable foresight presented a critique of the contextual parameters of all scientific discussion. He demonstrated long ago already that every scientific discipline rests in large part on hidden pre-suppositions; this idea goes much farther than the recently faddish discussions about paradigms that lie behind scientific theories. Dooyeweerd claims that this principle holds for all the disciplines, for mathematics, the natural sciences, history, and so forth. Why does he make this claim? Somewhere he says, "That two plus two is four is not true in and of itself, but only within the context of specific numerical laws and the like." Modern science today is willing to acknowledge such truths, I think, and many names could be mentioned here. Dooyeweerd not only points to "the context of specific laws," but also adds that these laws function only within the totality of modal aspects. Originally Dooyeweerd used the term "law spheres."² Modal aspects are dimensions of given reality. He underscores this point repeatedly and in its most abstract form sometimes even uses the word *a priori*.

In doing so Dooyeweerd anticipates a good number of current debates about scientific methodology, for example, as to whether or how it relates to realism. Realism and science is an important current debate, but Dooyeweerd is actually long past this discussion.

Remarkable Foresight

In what follows I will quickly review a few more of Dooyeweerd's theses. They all concern science, broadly defined, and theoretical analysis. Actually, that concern is what is so interesting about his philosophy. A related claim Dooyeweerd makes is that the ground-motives operative in science—which are much more than paradigms—are non-theoretical or supratheoretical in nature. Today some are beginning to sense this truth. At one time those who took a Marxist approach to science gave this claim an ideological twist. But for Dooyeweerd ground-motives run deeper. This has to do with his next thesis concerning the centrality of meaning. The question of the meaning of everything reaches farther than the various questions that can be posed within the laws of a particular science, even though these questions all ultimately hang together. Dooyeweerd used the term "meaning" (*zin*) in this connection. The question of meaning naturally arises in many disciplines as well as in the more hermeneutically oriented philosophies. But clearly for Dooyeweerd—and this is the next step—the question of meaning is ultimately always a religious question, not just another question like those posed by contemporary holists among others.

His next step, showing again the currency of his thinking, is even more surprising and corrects many errors in the modern philosophy of science. The question of meaning converges via the religious human self, the religious ego of the person. Dooyeweerd writes, "The *actual* return to oneself... *transcends* the limits of philosophical thought" (I, 3-12). His claim is that the source of that motivation and of the ego's acknowledgement of the question of meaning ultimately stands beyond, transcends, the limits of philosophy. In other words, he consciously steps outside of philosophy—a move that people again in our time have a sense of and that is actually explicitly indicated by Immanuel Kant, someone to whom Dooyeweerd often refers. But Dooyeweerd connects this step with science in such a way that you think: that is a warning finger for all contemporary discussions of scientific method. Most of the books on methodological questions would not have had to be written if Dooyeweerd's work had been well read first.

He then follows through on this idea: what does it involve, this transcending of "the speciality of meaning"? Each science has its own language, its own sense and reference, its own methodology. That is what must be transcended. Then you get "the actual view of totality." There is a remarkable tension here between the word "actual," which plays an important part in the later work of Dooyeweerd, and "totality." It is a totality, but one seen via "actuality." We will see what this idea means for the speciality of meaning and how it is becoming well accepted today in terms of "local knowledge," though without anchoring it in a deep sphere as Dooyeweerd has done. I use the words "in a deep sphere," because meaning, the next step, points beyond itself, toward an origin. He first writes "origin" in the lower case. Then he takes the next step and says, moving beyond pure science, beyond pure philosophy, that it concerns faith, ultimately with true belief in the true Origin. And wherever Dooyeweerd uses that word "Origin," with a capital letter, he clearly means the Creator God, the God of the Bible.

I have tried to summarize Dooyeweerd's philosophy in a few quick steps. His purpose is to indicate something about the restless mode of being of all that exists, as he himself puts it. You can grasp the totality only by transcending, by grasping beyond the boundaries of your science, of your specialty, of the sciences, of methodology, and of philosophy. And this transcendence takes place by means of a human being like myself and is possible, not because people are so important, but, as Dooyeweerd frequently says, because human beings are the image of God.

I can summarize my first point—I have six—as follows. The importance of Dooyeweerd with regard to contemporary discussions about science is that most philosophy of science has an immanent direction and cannot make that step beyond itself. Sometimes its immanence is so strong that it reduces, for example in physical or historical terms, everything to its own scientific field. The interrelated coherence of all the aspects of reality, of all those modal aspects, cannot be explained in the long run from the perspective of one of those aspects and certainly not immanently, from within those boundaries.

For that reason Dooyeweerd says that meaning does not exist in and of itself, but is dynamic,

pressing to point beyond itself. Meaning, for Dooyeweerd, is likewise from, through, and to an origin—still using "origin" in the lower case. And then he connects "origin" with the "genetic relativity of meaning." This expression should not be misunderstood. In no way is he suggesting that meaning is relative. He intends to underscore that meaning is relational: there is a relational reference in meaning's origin coming from the eternal origin, from God.

Meaning Coherence and Analogies

I have briefly reviewed the main points of Dooyeweerd's work in order to sketch the context. I can introduce my second point using a simple story from my own life. I was walking along the ocean near The Hague with a colleague of mine, an astronomer. It was a beautiful evening and I said to my friend, "Look, the sun is just about to set! Isn't that sky magnificent?" He looked at me and said, "Come now, don't you know that the sun's been under for a while already? It takes eight minutes for its light to get to us." We were obviously speaking two different languages. I was speaking a language of wholes, what Dooyeweerd calls naive language, and he was speaking scientifically. Dooyeweerd raises these kinds of problems repeatedly and rejects any reductionistic use of language. He does not say that the language of the astronomer is wrong in his own field. He says only that it is wrong to use that language in a broader context, because then you do not take into account the meaning that such precisely defined language has within broader lingual fields, for example, within other sciences, but also ultimately within normative aspects of the everyday.

Many faithful readers of Dooyeweerd's thick volumes will remember examples of the linden tree, the bird's nest, and others, that he extensively describes within an interwoven coherence, such that he can reject any scientific reductionism. The validity of his point, however, is often encumbered by an idiosyncratic and, I must admit, for other philosophers incomprehensible use of language. For example, he uses the words "subject" and "object" in a very peculiar manner. He talks about subject functions and object functions. That a nest, for example, has a biotic object func-

tion with respect to the biotic subject functioning of the bird and that a linden has an aesthetic object function for the artist. In doing so, he is indicating a strong tendency toward unity in each modal aspect and saying it is only in their connectedness that the aspects are done justice. For this and other reasons he criticizes Bertrand Russell and rejects positivism, empiricism, vitalism, historicism, holism.... The list would be too long if I included everything Dooyeweerd rejected. He rejects more than he accepts, as we will see. But that is the way it should be, he maintains. And what he accepts also proves to be particularly interesting.

The relevance of Dooyeweerd's philosophy is timely and growing.

There is a connecting element, for example, between the speaking of the astronomer and the speaking of the artist who is painting the setting sun. There is a coherence. That coherence consists, as it were, of what I am going to call particular "hinges." Dooyeweerd calls them analogies, some of which point back and others forward. Analogies refer to the intermodal coherence of meaning. Hence, the meaning of the tree can also be used as analogy. If I say that I am going to try to set up a tree in our discussion concerning Dooyeweerd, with trunk and branches, then tree is functioning analogically. And then Dooyeweerd says something I very much appreciated, "To my knowledge the importance of analogy has never yet been brought to bear on the method of science" (II, 55). Here you have it again. Discussing analogies has become very current. If people had only read that fifty years earlier, they could have begun then with what they find important today. Instead, they had to wait for Max Black or for the contemporary philosopher of science from Cambridge, Mary Hesse, in order to see how important analogies are as overarching method and as stimulus for posing models in science. Dooyeweerd himself says that analogies have been prominent only in the ancient world and then only in the context of logic and rhetoric.

For Dooyeweerd analogies all point to a kind of coherence, namely, a temporal coherence in our

cosmos. These analogies are not so much concepts or projections. Rather, they point to a coherence that is *given*, not just to something we have thought up. We have not been able to construct these analogies because coherence is present in the cosmos, in the temporal structure of the cosmos, and especially in the opening process of the cosmos. This coherence is something that is real. And that is why, I would say, Dooyeweerd gives us in fact a very modern form of ontology. I know that Dooyeweerd was not fond of the term "ontology," explaining that he was interested primarily in meaning, not being. He was critical of a number of ontologies current at the time, and rightly so. But in our time you could easily call this an ontology, even a concrete ontology, one that opposes a purely linguistic conception; that is to say, that lingual view where an analogy is only a lingual joke. That is not so, says Dooyeweerd. And in between the lines—and it had to be between the lines, because he obviously did not know about these developments yet—he very clearly rejects modern text theory, postmodernism, and cultural relativism. This rejection is there, if you read carefully.

I move to my third point, namely, that in the coherence of these aspects of reality the tree is opened up, via the opening up of that coherence, in other, different areas. As a result the tree can even function as an ethical object; so also there are passages in Dooyeweerd that are fully applicable to environmental philosophy. In those kind of passages the coherence is so strong that it turns one back to a new ontology formulated by his oft quoted phrase, "*Meaning is the being of all that has been created*" (I, 4). Within this context Dooyeweerd breaks with the "two cultures" of C. P. Snow, the division between the natural sciences and the humanities. For him it is one completely interrelated whole. He argues forcefully with those philosophers who claim that values belong only to the normative sciences. Apart from that, the term "value" plays an important part in Dooyeweerd's own thinking, more than, for example, the index to his *New Critique* might lead one to believe.

Dooyeweerd is of the opinion that "value" may be taken in neither a subjectivistic nor purely objectivistic sense. In other words, rather remark-

ably, he also has a kind of relational theory when it comes to value. It is not purely subjectivistic, taking "subjectivistic" in the sense Friedrich Nietzsche used it, but also not purely objectivistic. He also engages in discussion with Heinrich Rickert who developed an impressive values theory, but who attributed objectivity only to what was found in the logical sphere, hence defending a kind of dualism between values and empirical reality. The result, as far as Dooyeweerd is concerned, is that empirical reality, as "naive" or everyday experience, becomes too naive. I find this quite amusing, because Dooyeweerd himself talks about naive experience. His naive experience, as we will see below, is itself hardly naive. For Rickert, everyday experience was naive because the unity of "value reality" was beyond its reach. A surprisingly current term—"value reality" is more like a claim for a future philosophy, one coming after today's, or let's say that is coming after postmodernism.

In discussing "real," Dooyeweerd is also critiquing the position that there is a dualism of the world *an sich*, as it is by itself, that is then separate from the world as we find it, the phenomenal world, to use a kantian phrase. You can't maintain that division, says Dooyeweerd, because then the normative aspects of reality are eliminated. In other words, he is not interested in a philosophy that eliminates the normative aspects of reality anywhere, even when you are talking about linden trees or a bird's nest. Does this mean that there is a different kind of value theory for astronomers than for biologists? No, but the inner tendency toward unfolding does lie in the normed character of reality. Without it you cannot understand and come to know the true meaning of the diverse aspects of reality. That is why he points to the structure of time, the differentiation of reality, and the evaluative character of language and knowledge. Actually, many agree that more than language and knowledge are value-laden. But for most these values are still projections, something that lies within the person, such that you think that these must be what values are. No, says Dooyeweerd, values are not a projection but are part of reality itself, part of the unfolding process of reality itself. And that is, I would say, a very up-to-date ontology, one in which the value dimension

of reality is highlighted and an ontology that Dooyeweerd would certainly endorse.

Developing a System Open to Experience

I come now to my fourth, fifth, and sixth points. So far I have focused on how Dooyeweerd's scheme of things surpasses contemporary scientific methodologies. Now I want to talk about how these things work themselves out in Dooyeweerd's own philosophy, in other words, about the question of what developments are found within Dooyeweerd himself. In which direction does Dooyeweerd point? Which paths does he indicate that we might want to pursue? This, of course, is where things get interesting.

My fourth point then: What does he mean when he says that via the genetic relativity of modal meaning he wants to arrive at concrete things? He says that the modalities, the spatial, numerical, and physical modal aspects, to name just a few, are abstractions. That is why one must move from here toward the more concrete and more specific, the individuality structures and enkaptic intertwinements. I cannot get into all of these things here, but I do want to point out that he says repeatedly that you must move from these abstract things, which he also calls *apriori*, towards what is *aposteriori*, toward concrete things. And that is what he does in a very engaging way. He claims that what is tangible and concrete has to do with a "continuous realization of the transcendental temporal character of reality" (III, 109). The ongoing fulfillment of reality and its temporal direction is dynamic and continuous. Someone like Alfred North Whitehead comes to mind. Whitehead didn't read Dooyeweerd, but he had read Plato. That connection is interesting, also for theologians, of course; think of process theologians, for example, on whom Whitehead has had a good deal of influence. Dooyeweerd in many ways agrees with their claim that the world is meaningful because it is dynamic, but then adds that to seek a fixed point within this temporal world is like pursuing a mirage. It is not to be had or pinned down within the immanent sphere. It is too dynamic.

In like manner Dooyeweerd's research program, formulated in his third volume, reads: we must move from the purely abstract meaning of the

modal dimension, from the universal level, let's say from the spatial or juridical aspect of reality, to a new aspect that is defined by the "plastic horizon of human experience." It is here that we meet up with what he calls "naive experience." But this naive experience is really not so naive, because it is formed by diverse things, including scientific ways of thinking. And here again he makes the point that everything has an object function and functions in principle in all of the normed or value-laden aspects of reality.

That brings me to my fifth point. As I just pointed out, naive experience is really not so naive. Colors are not just something subjective.

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Naive experience is that plastic horizon and, as Dooyeweerd says, changing historically. Our naive experience, the events of everyday, are different than they were a hundred years ago, different than a thousand years ago, and different than those of another culture. These are all questions with which Dooyeweerd had begun to struggle. They may not be simply labelled as subjectivistic or anthropological.

For Dooyeweerd, daily experience in the light of scriptural revelation is filled with meaning. And that is why he says, 'Even though this book I'm busy with seems so abstract, let me begin with the analysis of seemingly trivial things like a tool or a table.' And he does it too. He has, so to speak, "local knowledge"—to use a term fashionable among some and known to those familiar with the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's book *Local Knowledge*. Dooyeweerd, with his broad conception of science as truly involved with aspects of reality, nevertheless had real local knowledge and begins with a tool, a table, and the like. Even though science is abstract, he realizes that it must ultimately focus on and as it were point toward and converge on those concrete things.

I think that it is safe to say that a shift in emphasis took place here in Dooyeweerd's work. The weight shifts toward what is concrete. It also shifts, for example, from the term "law spheres" to "modal aspects," which of course is something quite different. Modal aspect is not less than law sphere, but actually more: an approach to reality that Dooyeweerd repeatedly underscores as an open approach. The first, more open standpoint is that naive experience is plastic and historical. A second development is that he at times also adopts somewhat more positive attitudes with respect to philosophical standpoints that differ from his. I think for example of his critique of existentialism. In his *New Critique* you can find a note that says that he wants to make an exception for Christian existentialists, although he does not mention any names. It could even be that he was thinking there of the Dutch thinker De Sopper, with whom he had a number of connections. But it could also have been someone like Gabriel Marcel. But in any case, he explicitly limits his criticism to the humanistic philosophy of existence. I am also reminded of his esteem for another one of his contemporaries, the Dutch philosopher Ph. Kohnstamm. Once he even claimed that Kohnstamm had become a supporter of his philosophy. Now if you read Kohnstamm, you know that things are a bit more nuanced than that. And still, the personalism of Kohnstamm exhibits similarities with the human unfolding of all of reality as image bearers of God. I think that Kohnstamm could put the point the very same way and I think that there are others who could do the same. A third and even more obvious indication of greater openness is that Dooyeweerd speaks about the positive role of nonchristian philosophy in the unfolding process of culture. That too is worth thinking about. A fourth indication is the importance he attached to ecumenical cooperation. When you read that short passage about ecumenical efforts in his *New Critique*—that the boundaries of the church be kept in mind and be based on the central themes and motives of Scripture (III, 543)—it is as though he had just read the accounts of the organization of the World Council of Churches in 1948. I have the feeling that the phrasing is exactly the same. So yes, a growing openness.

Then finally, the sixth point. What I find to be most important is that through everything he increasingly tends to accentuate the open ended character of his entire system. In the second volume of his *New Critique* there is even a paragraph with the heading "the system is an open system" and the reference is to his own system. He writes, "Anyone who thinks he has devised a philosophical system that can be adopted unchanged by all later generations, shows his absolute lack of insight into the dependence of all theoretical thought on historical development" (II, 556). That is really telling.

I come to a kind of conclusion. I have tried to show, first, a shift from law spheres to aspects. Enough has been said about that. Second, I have discussed a new ontology, not one about being, but about a relational meaning, related to an Origin. Third, I have highlighted the role the normative aspect plays in that connection. Value and reality belong together, he says. Fourth, we have seen a movement toward the concrete, toward "local knowledge," a depth of dimensions in normal, everyday things. Fifth is historicity: the plastic horizon of daily experience and the historical changeability of the system. I think that Dooyeweerd himself indicated these five topics as shifts in emphasis in his own thinking. These five issues unite in the continuing openness sketched in my sixth point. Maybe it is even more than a shift in emphasis. I think that he has outlined a task for following generations, something he suggests in his historically sensitive remark about an open system.

A final comment brings me, possibly, a step beyond what Dooyeweerd has said. I want to read a little more than he probably intended into one word he uses. But I am not sure. The deeper dimension of Dooyeweerd's work is, I would say, the need to face the Origin of meaning and in the root of our being to make a choice. What does he mean by "in the face of the Origin of meaning"? If you would read that against the background I have just sketched, about value and the like, about a shift from law to modal aspects, what does he mean? Could he not mean more with "face" than stand before, and include encountering the countenance of? That is a well known expression in Hebrew, "*panim*." It can mean "to stand over against" or "in the presence of," but "*panim*" can

also mean "countenance." The face of God, "*panim*," the face of the Origin, the countenance of the hidden "Presence." Perhaps Dooyeweerd's work does indeed have a mystical subcurrent. Maybe his work is permeated by the awe of standing face to face with God.

So there is a development initiated by Dooyeweerd in moving from the term "law" toward what he called "aspects," a development that can continue. Personally, I think that the law notion was a bit too Greek, especially when "*wetsidee*," literally "law idea," gets translated with "Cosmonomic Idea." "Cosmos" is Greek, "nomos" is Greek, and so is "idea." What I see here is a development from law to torah, whereby torah is the Old Testament word for law that biblically has a different meaning. There it refers to the Presence of God, the Companion, a lamp to our feet and light for our path (Ps. 119). I think that had

Dooyeweerd developed his thoughts further he certainly would have endorsed this and said to me: My good friend (as he was wont to call me), we must dare to step beyond philosophy. There we can dance with each other with the rolls of the Torah in our hands, for there is the presence of the face of God!

END NOTES

- 1 This translation from the Dutch is by John H. Kok, with permission of the author. "Dooyeweerd en de wetenschappelijke discussie," in *Dooyeweerd herdacht, Referaten gehouden op het Dooyeweerd-symposium aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op vrijdag 18 november 1994*, J. de Bruijn, ed. (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1995) 79-94.
- 2 Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 4 vols. Translated by David H. Freeman, William S. Young, and H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1953-1958).