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Engaging and Enriching Non-Christian Thought: The Case of Andrew Basden



by Steve Bishop

Introduction

Andrew Basden is a Christian academic working in a non-Christian academic institution. Basden's desire is for Christians to engage with mainstream thinking, to engage with non-Christian academic thought.¹

Christian thought, or scholarship, according to Reformed academic Robert Sweetman, can be identified as having three approaches: complementarist, integrationist, and holistic.² In the holistic category, Sweetman briefly examines Basden, as well as Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd,

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whose ideas Basden applies in his own work, as an exemplar.

Like Sweetman, Basden also identifies three approaches to Christian scholarship: “antagonism,” “acquiescence,” and “enrichment.”³ Enrichment is part of the holistic approach discussed by Sweetman. Basden's approach moves away from an antagonistic, critical approach and toward a critique **and** enrichment approach to non-Christian thought. (Compare this approach to Strauss's notion of “critical solidarity”⁴).

To engage and enrich non-Christian thought, Basden has been utilising and embracing Dooyeweerd's philosophy. This paper will explain his Dooyeweerdian approach, what he terms his “LACE strategy” (listening, affirming, critiquing and enriching), and will briefly look at his influence.

Basden does not necessarily agree with all of Dooyeweerd's philosophy. He does, however, regard Dooyeweerd's theory of aspects as a good exposition of the variety of meaningfulness in the world. He originally adopted Dooyeweerd's philosophy because it “works' better than others.” As he explains,

That Dooyeweerd shared my faith is a bonus—and also an explanation of why he was able to articulate such radical and useful ideas about meaning and everyday life.⁵

Basden has spent his career in a non-Christian academic institution, the University of Salford, Manchester, UK, and has published primarily in non-Christian academic journals. This context

inevitably means engaging with non-Christian thought. He explains how he engages:

[W]e should see secular thought as **impaired insight**, and we can **engage** with its content, by

- acknowledging there might be genuine insight, and trying to work out what is genuine insight;
- understanding that, why and how it might be distorted;
- making a contribution that lessens the distortion and enriches the insight.⁶

Although he doesn't mention it by name, it seems Basden is coming from a common-grace approach. He doesn't take all non-Christian ideas as wrong but instead as "impaired insight"—and insight nevertheless.

Basden doesn't fully clarify what he means by "impaired insight," and some have objected to this idea.⁷ But what should not be implied from this term is that Christians have **unimpaired** insight; after all, we all "see through a glass darkly" (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). Christians have blind spots, and non-Christians can help to identify these. Christians do not have a monopoly on truth. As Dooyeweerd observed, "Thanks to common grace, relative truths are to be found in every philosophy, although the interpretation of such truths may appear to be unacceptable from the biblical standpoint."⁸

A Dooyeweerdian approach

In his academic work, Basden utilises Dooyeweerd's philosophy to prove his point. He was first introduced to Dooyeweerd's philosophy in the early 1990s at Spring Harvest, an annual British Evangelical conference, by Rev. Richard Russell, who ran the Christian Studies Unit in Bath, UK.⁹ In an interview, Basden remarked that this philosophy had "shaped [his] academic life ever since."¹⁰ He regards Dooyeweerd's approach as the best philosophy of everyday life that is yet to emerge—it works better than other philosophies.

He likes Dooyeweerd's approach for a number of reasons (numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers in his book *Foundations of Information Systems*¹¹):

- It takes seriously everyday experience (26)
- It can address a broad range of issues (26)

- It is multi-aspectual (27)
- It offers radically different notions of
 - Subject and object
 - Meaning
 - Time
 - Progress
 - The good and the self

Its starting points differ from those of other philosophies and take seriously

- Everyday experience
- Meaningfulness
- The diversity and coherence of creation

In other words, Basden thinks that Dooyeweerd's philosophy is wide-ranging, comprehensive, and deep. It also opens up new ways of thinking (44).

Those new ways of thinking appeal to different secular and religious groups. As he comments,

Interestingly, I found it was non-Christians rather than Christians who liked [Dooyeweerd's] ideas: Humanists, Muslims and Hindus. I think Humanists liked Dooyeweerd because his aspects provide a welcome[d] holistic view of things, which gets over the usual dualisms that occur. I think that Muslims and Hindus especially liked the fact that in Dooyeweerd's scheme the religious (pistic) aspect is laid alongside all the others, not as dominating them nor as ignored, but as of equal value.¹²

Does the non-Christian appropriation and appreciation of Dooyeweerd's philosophy undermine the claim that Dooyeweerd's approach is Christian? This is what Brümmer has termed "the dilemma of Christian philosophy."¹³ There is not necessarily a dilemma, however. Cannibalism and infanticide are seen as wrong by a majority of differing worldviews; i.e., there can be shared values within conflicting worldviews. Marriage is a Christian institution; its adoption by naturalists doesn't undermine its Christian basis. If two intersecting ellipses represent a Christian and a naturalistic worldview, they overlap where shared beliefs and values can cohere. However, the sharing of beliefs and ideas by Christians and non-Christians does not undermine the fact that the ideas are Christian ideas. The overlap could be seen as an area of common grace.

Basden also appreciates Dooyeweerd's beginning with everyday experience. Unlike most philosophical schools, Dooyeweerd's does not denigrate pre-theoretical thought: it makes pre-theoretical thought its important starting point. For Dooyeweerd, theoretical thought is not neutral and not autonomous. Rather, it is impacted by religious presuppositions. Religion is not separate or confined to a personal private sphere but impacts and determines theoretical thought.

Meaning is also key to Dooyeweerd's approach. Basden writes,

Over the course of its history, philosophy has seldom discussed meaning, of any kind, and especially not meaningfulness of Dooyeweerd's kind. Where meaning has been discussed, it has usually been presumed that meaning derives from something more fundamental—from essence of things or final cause (Aristotle), from self-maintenance (Heidegger), from interpretation (Gadamer, Ricoeur), from discourses (Habermas). The meaning of life has attracted debate, but only within a relatively isolated silo, and has been presumed to consist of one of its aspects, like goodness or pleasure.

Most recent philosophers presuppose that meaning is purely subjective, generated *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by humans (or sentient beings)—or maybe intersubjectively in groups. This implies that the kinds of meaning generated are essentially arbitrary and hence its diversity is not worth studying; only generative processes are worth studying.¹⁴

On the Dooyeweerd pages (www.dooy.info), maintained by Basden, he writes more polemically:

What Heidegger did for Being, Dooyeweerd did for Meaningfulness. Dooyeweerd can heal the Cartesian rift between **subject and object** and the Kantian gulf between **ontology and epistemology**, without denying any of them. [Bold emphasis in the original].

This notion of meaning as meaningfulness is developed further elsewhere by Basden.¹⁵

Does the non-Christian appropriation and appreciation of Dooyeweerd's philosophy undermine the claim that Dooyeweerd's approach is Christian?

Dooyeweerd's "ground-motives" are central to the notion of the non-neutrality of theoretical thought. Basden describes the relationship between "ground-motives" and worldview and links them to "meaningfulness":

Ground-motives are generators of worldviews. They are "origins of meaning" that define the range of kinds of meaningfulness from which worldviews arise.¹⁶

Perhaps the best way to illustrate Basden's use of Dooyeweerd's philosophy is to look at two examples—one where he uses Dooyeweerd's *modal aspects* (a chemical business) and the other using Dooyeweerd's *ground-motives* (artificial intelligence). These will also serve as illustrators of Basden's work.

Modal aspects

"Dooyeweerd's aspects are spheres of meaningfulness that, together, constitute the ocean of meaningfulness within which we swim," writes Basden, utilising his ocean metaphor of meaning. This ocean is a

social-spatial-juridical-lingual-physical-economic-organic-ethical-analytical-pistic-etc. law side that enables us and all temporal reality to be and function in all these ways.¹⁷

The ocean metaphor emphasises that we dwell in meaning. An aspect is a way of looking at something, a way in which things can be meaningful. Aspects are both "spheres of meaning" and "spheres of law."¹⁸ Dooyeweerd delineates fifteen different aspects, which Basden describes:

Fifteen aspects of temporal reality are discussed and may be read in any order. The first three—quantitative, spatial and kinematic—are what Dooyeweerd called mathematical aspects because they are pre-physical. The next three—physical, biotic and psychic/sensitive—are pre-human aspects, in that they govern material, plants and animals, though they also apply to

humans. The next three —analytical, formative and lingual—govern individual human cognition. The next three—social, economic and aesthetic—are aspects of our living together. The final three aspects—juridical, ethical and pistic/faith—are especially important in the health of society.¹⁹

It is tempting to use Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects as a checklist to ensure that all aspects are covered, but this is not Dooyeweerd’s intention.²⁰ Drawing on his experience in the chemical industry, Basden develops a modal-aspect analysis of a chemical production business (see table 1 below).

Ground-motives

One of the many questions that have dominated the artificial intelligence community is this: Are computers similar to humans? Some passionately argue “Yes”; others vehemently “No.” Basden finds a way out of this impasse by using Dooyeweerd’s “ground-motives.”

Dooyeweerd identified four religious

“ground-motives” that have shaped the development of Western culture. These are (1) form-matter; (2) grace-nature; (3) freedom-nature; (4) creation-fall-redemption. The first three are “internally dualistic and fragmentary.”²² (The fourth is biblical. A useful historical overview of these “ground-motives” is found in Dooyeweerd’s *Roots of Western Culture*.)

Basden suggests that those who think computers and humans are not similar are responding out of a form-matter ground-motive. The mind (form) is different from computers (matter). He discerns three different approaches to the AI question:²³

1. Debates about substance: human is mind, computer is matter
2. Debates about causality: humans operate biologically, computers physically (associated with John Searle)
3. Debate about determinacy: human is free, computer is determined.

Table 1. Aspects of running a chemical production business.²¹

Aspect	Kernel	Management situations or issues
Quantitative	Amount	Figures; accounting
Spatial	Extension	Spatial layout of site and buildings
Kinematic	Movement	Movement around site and building; movement of product
Physical	Energy	Physical integrity of buildings and plant; chemical reactions
Organic-biotic	Life	Food hygiene in canteen; product safety
Psychic / Sensitive	Feeling	Use of eyes, ears in production; how employees feel
Analytical	Distinction	Clarity and logicity of instructions, goals and vision
Formative	Construction	Planning, designing, manufacturing
Lingual	Signification	Signage; records; trademarks
Social	Togetherness	Team building; structure of organization
Economic	Frugality	Budgets, deadlines; waste, efficiency; resources
Aesthetic	Harmony, Fun	Harmony of organization; enjoying work; decoration
Juridical	Due	Legal matters, contracts; responsibility
Ethical	Self-giving	Generosity, ethicality of organization
Pistic / Faith	Belief	Vision and mission; loyalty; religious faiths

Position 1 Basden identifies with the form-matter ground-motive: the human mind is form, and computers are matter. Position 2 he identifies as the nature-grace ground-motive: humans work at a biological level, above “nature,” while computers work at the physical level (“nature”), so they cannot be the same thing. Position 3 is the nature-freedom ground-motive: how can the deterministic (“nature”) produce something that is free?

All three of the positions are dualistic. They isolate aspect pairs. Position 1 is analytical-physical. Position 2 is organic-physical. And position 3 is lingual-physical.

Each of these ground-motives is a blinker to the proponents. The creation, fall, redemption ground-motive is the only one that takes into account all aspects, and so helps remove the blinkers. Basden takes a multi-aspect approach. This means that the dualism of the other three positions can be avoided. The aspects can work together and are not in opposition. This idea implies that the three positions are limiting reality to certain aspects. But a consideration of all the other aspects opens up different areas of debate. Considering Dooyeweerd’s ground-motives thus enriches the debate. This enrichment can also be seen in Basden’s employing the listen, affirm, critique and enrich (LACE) strategy.

The LACE strategy

Basden advocates an enrichment approach rather than an antagonistic one when engaging with non-Christian perspectives. He writes, “Christian thinking is used to account for and enrich the world’s thinking by transplanting it from its current ground-motive (usually that of nature-freedom) into the arguably more fertile soil of the creation-fall-redemption ground-motive.”²⁴ In fact, “Dooyeweerdian thought can underpin and accept, reinterpret and enrich the world’s thinking.”²⁵

Basden finds that, “while most Christians seem doubtful about Dooyeweerd’s philosophy, many non-Christians value and are attracted to his thought. Why is this? Perhaps nobody else provides

such a sound basis for interdisciplinary and rich complexity that is able to address the real problems we face today. Some find the centrality of Meaning attractive, while others find the ground-motives useful.”²⁶

Basden utilises a four-stage model of “listen, affirm, critique/reinterpret, and enrich,” explained below. This approach may mitigate against misunderstandings and help communication with those who hold other worldviews, as a lack of accessibility and clarity is generally thought to be a weakness of the Reformational movement.²⁷

Basden explains each stage as follows:

- **Listen:** the key to any debate and discussion is being able to understand where people are coming from. Obviously, this can only take place if we listen to what they have to say, rather than merely assume.
- **Affirm:** everyone is dealing with the data of God’s creation, irrespective of what they perceive God to be. Consequently, there will be some element of truth in their approach. There will be some germ of truth somewhere in their work, even if the partial truth is made the whole truth. It is important to identify the truth and affirm it.
- **Critique:** Basden does not adopt an antagonistic position towards other views, but he does acknowledge that critique is necessary. No perspective has the monopoly on truth, not even Dooyeweerd’s. As Dooyeweerd himself was keen to stress, we all need critical friends. Part of the critique will be to identify the ground-motives that lie beneath the perspectives, to identify which modal aspects have been ignored and which have been over-stressed, to identify weaknesses and invalid arguments in the work, to identify neglected areas, and to show how the work could be strengthened and improved. Criticism does not have to be exclusively negative, an idea that brings us to the final stage: enrichment.

Basden advocates an enrichment approach rather than an antagonistic one when engaging with non-Christian perspectives.

- **Enrichment:** For Basden, enrichment cannot occur until the three previous stages have taken place. It consists primarily in suggesting insights from Dooyeweerd.²⁸

Basden rejects Kuyper's antithesis (or conflict of Christian and non-Christian worldviews) as his starting point. He recognises that Dooyeweerdian and immanence thought have radically different religious starting points but should not be antithetical to each other. This means that Dooyeweerdians can make connections with other thinkers instead of adopting an adversarial attitude, which he maintains the Kuyperian antithesis can breed. He sees Dooyeweerd's enormous respect for other thinkers as a support for this approach.

The LACE approach, epitomised/exemplified in his *Foundations of Information Systems* (2018a), is not adversarial.²⁹ Neither is it uncritical: it involves what Dooyeweerd termed "an immanent critique" and "a transcendental critique." Obviously, listening must precede immanent critique, for without listening, one cannot make an "immanent critique." Listening, affirming, and critiquing often involve an "immanent critique," while critiquing and enriching imply a "transcendental critique."³⁰

The influence of Andrew Basden:

The Dooyeweerd pages

Basden has been the source and originator of the Dooyeweerd pages (www.dooy.info), which were begun in 1997. After being introduced to Dooyeweerd by Russell in the early 1990s, Basden realised the need to make these insights more accessible and to clear up any misunderstanding of them. The header for the website sums up its purpose: "The Dooyeweerd Pages is a growing website designed to aid scholars in understanding the philosophical framework of the late Herman Dooyeweerd."

The aim of the pages is thus to help others understand Dooyeweerd's philosophy (especially his aspects); to explore, discuss, critique Dooyeweerd; to compare his ideas with those of others; and to use Dooyeweerd's ideas in practice. For many, these pages have provided the first port of call for understanding Dooyeweerd. As of August 2019, there

are over 300 different pages on the site. A Google search on "Dooyeweerd" places the Dooyeweerd pages second place—second only to the Wikipedia page.

Originally the Dooyeweerd pages focused on the modal aspects, but as Basden has come to see that Dooyeweerd is more than his aspects, the Dooyeweerd pages have grown to reflect this development in Basden's understanding. Now links to comparisons of Dooyeweerd with other philosophers such as Foucault, Heidegger, and Habermas; social theorists like Vygotsky and Giddens; and thinkers like Latour and Bhaskar can be found there.

There is no doubt that for many, the Dooyeweerd pages provide an accessible introduction to Dooyeweerd. In 2015, Basden analysed the use of the Dooyeweerd pages during one week: he found that there were 9323 hits in one week.³¹

The Business Department at the University of Salford

Here Basden remarks,

When Dooyeweerd formulated his philosophy, he did so from a Dutch Christian position. It may be seen that people from many cultures of the world, and of different religious commitments, have found his ideas valuable. Cross-cultural empathy and sensitivity to everyday experience are two of the strong points of Dooyeweerd's philosophy. It is the University of Salford that takes a leading interest in this worldwide.³²

This is certainly the case with the diversity of Basden's Ph.D. students. They have applied Dooyeweerd's insights, under his supervision, to a wide range of issues: procrastination, e-government, computer use by teachers, knowledge elicitation, interview techniques, tacit knowledge, sustainable development, trust, use of ICT by people both in organisations and outside organisations, and storage of electronic medical records. All the students testify to new insights provided by Dooyeweerd's approach and by the support and encouragement of Basden. The success of the department is due to the work and effort of Basden.

Conclusion

Basden has become a key figure within reformational philosophy. He claims not to be “trained in philosophy”; rather, he describes himself as “a philosopher-applier.”³³ He applies philosophical insights, and he integrates theory and practice. He has applied Dooyeweerdian insights to information technology and information systems for over thirty years. In so doing, he has overcome many obstacles in promoting Christian philosophy in a non-Christian context with doctoral students who claim no Christian allegiance. He does it in a way that engages and enriches insights of non-Christians. He also provides an excellent role model for others to follow. His approaches to non-Christian thought and his development of Dooyeweerd’s philosophy are full of possibilities and potential for further research.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

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